e One With The Lies (QUARREL CITY SERIES

by mccnlightvv

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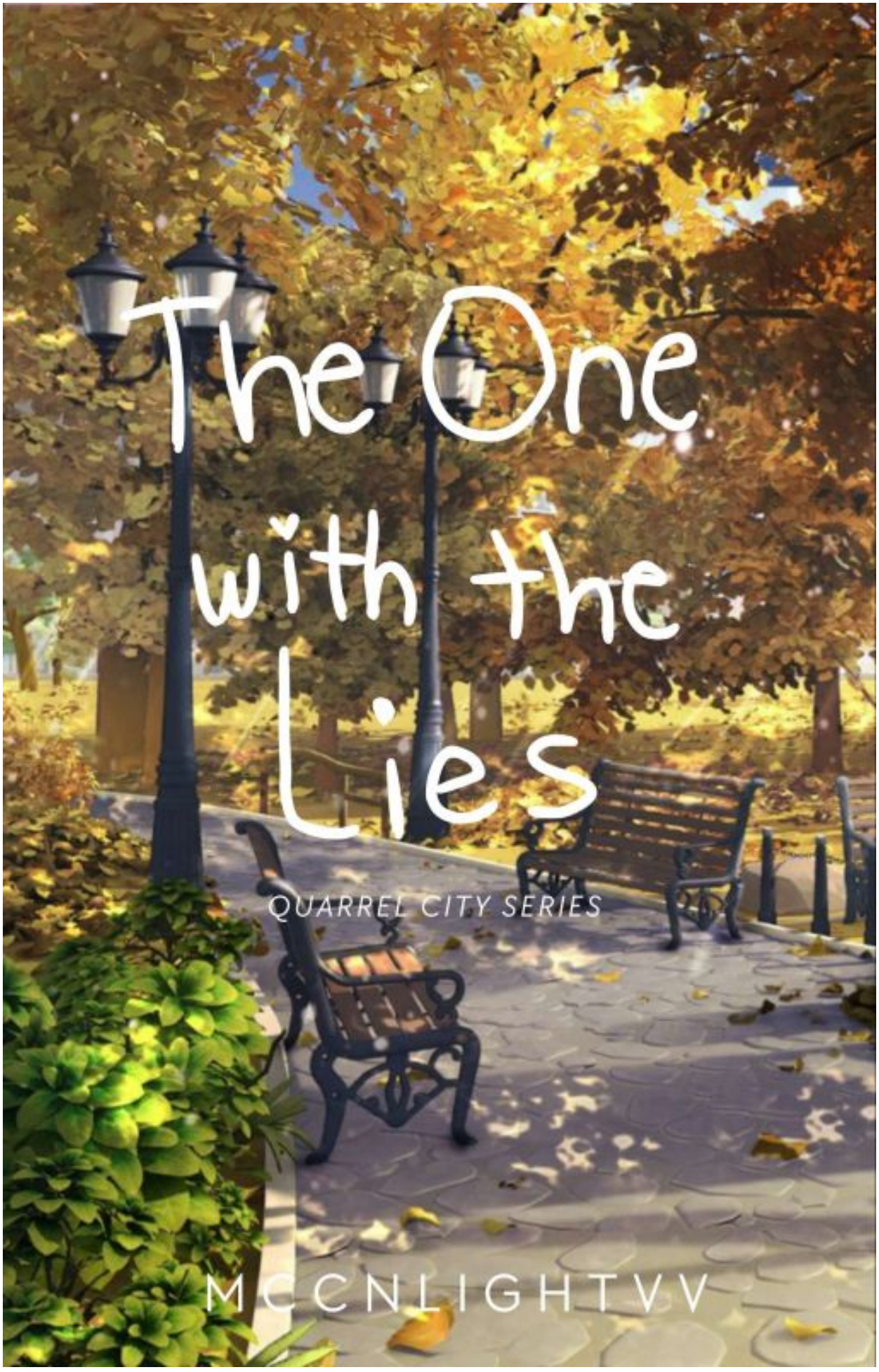
The One with the Lies
QUARREL CITY SERIES
MCCNLIGHTVV

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The One With The Lies [QUARREL CITY SERIES #4]

The series takes place in Baguio, Benguet. However, some names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, fiction or not, actual events or actual places is purely coincidental.

Content warning : This book contains content that might be troubling some readers, including, but not limited to, depictions of and reference of violence and sexual abuse. Please be mindful of this and other possible triggers.

Some scenes, words, or paragraphs are not appropriate for very young readers. Read at your own risk. You are warned.

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This is my fourth novel in Wattpad under the Quarrel City Series.

This story is unedited. Grammatical errors, spelling, and punctuation will be edited soon. I'm very open to criticism. However, I'm taking my time to improve. Please don't hesitate to alert me for any errors. That would be highly appreciated. Thank you so much!

Let me take you to my paradise. Welcome, aboard!

Kabanata 1

The air in Manila was hot and sticky. My auburn hair was blown by the passing of jeepneys and cars from the highway. I reached for my handkerchief in my pockets and covered my nose.

I finally caught Rex walking out of his campus with a girl on his side. I breathed loudly. My heart was filled with anger. Iritado kong tinapon ang panyo sa daan at nagmartsa papunta doon.

I ran behind them. Singhap ang narinig ko kay Rex noong nakita niya ako sa harapan niya. The girl didn't even know who I was.

"Anong ginagawa mo dito, Win?" Rex asked me. He looked nervous.

"You really have the nerve to ask me that?" I looked at the girl beside him. "And who is this, Rex?"

"Let's talk about this later. Ihahatid ko siya pauwi!"

"What!" I exclaimed. "You have a girlfriend, Rex!"

He closed his eyes. "She's just a friend, Winona. Wala siyang sasakyan pauwi."

"And you're obligated to take her home? Are you her driver or something!"

The girl shyly looked at me. She wasn't that pretty as I am. She looked decent and shy. Sa isang tingin, hindi ko iisipin na kaya niyang lumandi sa lalaking may girlfriend na.

"Uuwi nalang ako, Rex..." she said. "Kita nalang tayo bukas."

My eyes widened. "Are you kidding me?"

Rex couldn't speak a word properly. He looked uneasy. Mukhang gusto pa niya habulin 'yong babae. I couldn't believe it. He looked at me like I did something wrong. My mouth just couldn't stick together.

"You know what?" I sighed. "Let's break up, Rex!"

He looked at me ridiculously. "No, Win. I am breaking up with you. You're crazy!"

"No! I'm dumping you. Now you can kiss that ugly girl's face all you want!"

"Damn it, Winona! Go home!"

I screamed my lungs out to him as I left. Everyone at the University of Santo Tomas saw how I cursed him to death and him turning his back out of embarrassment. He even threatened to ban me out of the school but I didn't care.

After that incident, I went home with my eyes bawled out.

I am one spoiled brat, people say. I get mad when things doesn't turn out my way. Even when I was a kid, my parents didn't know how to deal with me. I was a pressure for some people. In school, they didn't want me for group activities because I am demanding and bossy. I hear it all the time.

But most of the time, they get surprised on how much I care about the people I love. Families, friends, even boyfriends. I fight for them. When I mean fight, I really fight.

"This is the last time I'm telling you this, Winona. Whatever you do, think about how it will affect the view to our family," father said.

Nilingo ko siya. "It was necessary. Have I told you how offended I was about the other girl? She wasn't pretty!"

Hinilot niya ang sentido niya. "I am running for mayor, Win. These petty things you do could ruin me. What did I tell you?"

"But you're running for mayor in Baguio. Not in Manila, Dad."

He sighed. Sumandal siya sa upuan at matagal na nag-isip.

I did everything in my father's favor. He always tells me how bright and strong I am, that I have bigger things ahead of me. I always wanted him to be proud of me and so I am who I am now. I never accept failure, like my father did. I never accept defeat. Winning is not a choice. It's what I should always be.

My father stood up after his dinner and kissed my forehead. "I'm forgiving you for now. Do not forget our plans, Winona. You know how angry I will get if I won't win this term."

Ever since we lost my mother when I was 13, my father was different. He became more tight. Our business are doing good but he works like it's on a tightrope. We used to live in Baguio before. It was my mother's hometown. We only moved in Manila because my father handles his businesses here. He didn't want me to be alone in our house so he took me with him.

Recently, he had a fire within him to run for Mayor this term.

I packed my bags just like what my father told me to. Habang nag-aayos ako ng mga gamit ko ay humahagulgol ako.

"Give it up, Win. He doesn't deserve your tears!" Shannon, my cousin said while she was helping me pack my things.

I sat in the bed. "I loved him. Clearly, he didn't. Hindi ko matanggap, Shan!"

"Na ano? Na hindi ka mahal o pinagpalit ka doon sa sinasabi mong pangit?"

"Well, isn't that the same thing?"

"You only dated for three months. It's not a big deal!"

Matalim ko siyang tinignan. "I introduced him to Dad, Shannon. It's a big deal! I never introduced anyone to Dad."

Umikot ang mata niya. "Yeah, well, Tito didn't like him anyway. Isa pa, aalis ka na. Don't you think this is good so you can move on sa tatlong buwan niyong pagmamahalan?"

"Are you mocking me right now?"

She laughed. "You will meet a lot of better guys in Baguio."

"Hindi ako interesado, Shan. I'm just going there because Dad needs me to. If not, I'd be dating a BGC model here. And what am I supposed to do there? Freeze to death and stare at pine trees?"

"Oh, you're just saying that. I bet they're way more hotter than Manila boys."

I raised my perfectly threaded eyebrow. "Babe, I grew up seeing guys in crisp polos, driving nice cars, and smelling like money. I'm not gonna be flirting with someone wearing three jackets and a beanie from ukay like it’s fashion week."

"Who knows maybe the mountains are hiding one decent boy worth ruining your standards for."

"I don't fall for mountain boys."

Shannon laughed.

People always romanticize Baguio like some kind of fairy tale backdrop. The fog kissing your skin, pine trees whispering secrets, lovers holding hands on Session Road like it’s a movie scene.

It was different for me.

My mother was born and raised there. She speaks their languages, she knows the culture and everything. Unlike me, Mommy has a gentle heart. She was kind and never had an evil heart on anyone.

It was raining, the kind that makes the cold creep into your bones. Mama’s hand was warm around mine. I remember the sound of the car, the curve of the road, the smell of pine and wet soil. And then… nothing. Just sirens. Screams.

They said it was an accident. People say that a lot, accident. Pero sa akin, para akong ninakawan. It was a miracle that I survived that day. But to me, I wish I hadn't be the one who survived. I just wish it was her instead.

Binuksan ko ang cellphone ko at tinignan ang class schedule ko. I looked down at my University of Cordillera ID hanging in my neck.

Lopez, Winona Jean L.
Bachelor of Science in Psychology
University of Cordillera

Kabanata 2

I came to Baguio not for anything but a purpose. The cold air stung my skin the moment I stepped out of the car, and for a second, it felt like the city was daring me to turn back.

I'm pretty sure I'm late. I held my notebook tight. Diretso ako naglakad sa hindi pamilyar na building. They were all wearing the same ID lace just like mine. Green.

Pumasok ako sa classroom ko ngayong umaga. I sat on the front. The class haven't started yet just like what I assumed. I scribbled on my pen and notebooks. Maayos ko itong nilatag sa harapan ko.

I was in the same course in Manila so I had to take a few subjects here. Hassle pa iyon sa akin. Dad had to pull some strings pa for me to be one of graduating students this year.

Sunod sunod ang pasok ng mga students. Some glances at me. Some even whispers around me. But no one dared to seat beside me. Buti naman. I'd rather not being touched for now.

"Late na naman yata si prof. Saan kayo mag-lunch?" I heard a girl said behind me.

"Sa karinderya na lang sa labas."

"Ako din. May baon ako kanin, ulam nalang bibilhin ko."

I tilted my head.

Umingay lalo ang bulungan nang pumasok ang ilang estudyante. My eyes stopped on a tall chinito guy wearing black hoodie and dark pants. He was holding a black notebook on his hand and a gray bag on one of his shoulders. His hair was messy and it looked kind of spiky because of it. Singkit at nakangisi sa mga kasama niyang lalaki.

A smile curved in my lips.

He's not hard to spot. Ofcourse, he is Japanese.

I watched him seat at the back with the boys he was with. Tuwid ang upo ko. I planned to stay lowkey for now. I didn't want my intention to be loud.

"Good morning, sir!" everyone greeted when the professor entered.

"Ah, yes," the professor said as soon as she entered and saw me. "Why don't you introduce yourself in the class, Miss..."

I smiled widely and stood up. Naglakad ako patungo sa gitna. I was wearing a checkered skirt and white fitted polo shirt. Pumaswit ang mga lalaki sa likod at nagkantyawan. They laughed.

"I'm Winona Jean Lopez," I said. "I'm 22 and I am pleased to be with you until the end of semester."

"Please be with me daw!"

They laughed.

I glanced at the Japanese guy. He wasn't even looking. Nakatingin siya sa cellphone niya. He even looked bored. Unlike the other boys who were gawking at me. Ano ba? Hindi ba siya nagagandahan sa akin?

The class wasn't boring like what I expected. Panay ang taas ko ng kamay tuwing nagtatanong. I was active. The professor memorized my name quickly because I would always answer his questions.

Nakita kong sumusulyap sa akin iyong hapon tuwing tumatayo ako. I smiled at him as I sat down.

Nang matapos na ang klase, in-obserbahan ko ng maigi. He doesn't put his black notebook on his bag. He just carries in on his hand with his phone. Itinaas niya ang hoodie niya at may tinignan sa cellphone.

Kinagat ko ang labi ko. I went out immediately after he did. Para akong may misyon habang pinapanood siyang naglalakad. I looked at my classroom for my second subject. He's heading there, too. Oh, good!

He entered the room and I did, too. I pretended to be clueless. The room was still empty when we entered. Parang iisa pa lang ang estudyante.

He sat down at the back, as usual. I would sit in front but my feet went straight to the back, beside him. I placed my bag neatly beside his.

His eyes was straight to the board. Kinagat ko ang dila ko at naupo sa tabi niya. I stopped and looked at him. His jaw is clenched. Matangos ang ilong, singkit at matalim ang mga mata niya. His lips were naturally pink. His skin is fair and his body is in a good form which made me guess that he spends time in gym.

Teka, umurong yata dila ko.

Muli, nilatag ko ang mga gamit ko. I cleared my throat. What happened to being lowkey, Winona?

I looked at my watch and looked at him. I pretended to be shocked to see him. Napansin niya iyon agad.

"Same class again?" I said and laughed.

He looked at me. Dahan dahan siyang tumango. May kaunting kunot ang noo niya. My eyes fell down on his ID.

Ayasaki, Akiro D.
Bachelor of Science in Psychology
University of Cordillera

"Akiro," I spoke his name. "Oh, you're Japanese."

Good work on playing dumb, Winona.

Akiro raised his eyebrow. Akmang magsasalita sana pero may naupo sa kabilang upuan. My smile faded when I saw the same girl back in my class. She looked at me and gave me a fake smile.

She looked at Akiro. "I told you to reserve me a seat, Kiro. My seat was almost taken!" she laughed and gave me a side-eye.

Kumunot ang noo ko.

"Hi, I'm Darleen!" maligaya niyang bati. "Winona, right?"

Tumango ako.

"Where are you from? I heard you're a transferee."

"I was born here," I said. "But I lived in Manila for a long time."

"Oh, I see..." ngumiwi siya. "Mas madami siguro units mo sa amin since, you know..." hilaw siyang tumawa.

Tumango ako. "Just a few."

I was about to talk to Akiro but she butted in again. I pursed my lips and slightly pissed off.

"Are you hanging out with Juan again tonight?" she asked.

Humigpit ang hawak ko sa ballpen ko. I know a bitch when I spotted one. I am a bitch. Alam ko ang kauri ko.

"Amper lang," Akiro said.

His voice was low and very manly. There's no Japanese accent on that one. Kinilabutan ako.

"Ah, talaga? Pwede ako sumama? Kasama ba sila Dheia?"

He shrugged. "Hindi ko sigurado."

Amper? Amper what? What is that? A mountain? Gubat?

I licked my lips and joined the conversation. "I'd love to come too. What is Amper?"

Akiro looked at me. He scanned me and smirked like something was funny in his head. Ganoon din ang kaibigan niyang si Darleen.

She pouted. "It's a bar, Winona. Do you drink?"

"Yeah," I said. "Is it far? I just live nearby."

"I don't really recommend it for you, lalo na wala ka pa naman kakilala dito."

I smiled. "I know Akiro... and maybe you."

Akiro licked his lips. He looked at me. Nagtagal bago siya nagsalita.

"We've only known each other for three seconds, and you're coming with me in a bar?" he asked me with his borely eyes.

Darleen chuckled as she looked at me like she won or something. I smiled pretentiously. If she had known me back in Manila, she would shut her mouth because I'm going to fight her back. But I am keeping my mouth shut this time.

Bago pa man ako magsalita ay sumunod na pumasok na ang professor namin. I didn't have the chance to defend myself. Kunot ang noo ko habang nakikinig sa klase.

Hindi na muli kami naging magkaklase ng hapon na iyon. Instead of gawking about it, I just did everything I could just to feel better. Maagang natapos ang klase namin. My father is in different places now, probably in meetings.

Staying at our house felt different. My room used to be so small, but they had a small renovation, so I have my own bathroom and closet now. Wala akong kasama bukod sa nag-iisang kasambahay namin.

Shannon : Rex asked me if you really left Manila. I told him you're studying in Baguio.

Me : Stupid. Why did you tell him that?

Shannon : Well, akala ko ba mahal mo?

Shannon : Anyway, he's messaging you daw. You never knew what you have talaga until you lose it. Lol.

Me : Corny.

Me : I'm moving on. I don't cry about him anymore. I don't want to be back to zero.

Shannon : Infairness.

Shannon : How's Baguio? May nakita ka nang hottie?

Ngumiwi ako.

Me : Pangit, meron.

I smirked as I opened my Facebook. I tried searching his name on Facebook. Lumutang agad iyon, unang una. Tumaas ang kilay ko.

His profile is nothing. Everything about him was private. Only tagged posts of his basketball team and some of his friends. Wala din siyang Instagram or even anything other than Facebook.

Pinindot ko ang add friend button. I even sent him a DM. Which I don't do on normal days. But him? Gosh. He should screenshot and frame it. Ako na 'to!

Winona Jean Lopez : Hi! Is this your Facebook account? We're classmates in Ab Psych and Thesis. Remember?

Winona Jean Lopez : I was wondering if I could ask for lectures from you. I don't have anyone I can ask to.

Winona Jean Lopez : It will be a great help. :)

I rolled my eyes. This is useless. Hindi din naman ako papansinin n'yan.

I sighed. I pursed my lips and sat down. Binuksan ko ang map ng phone ko at nagtype doon.

Ampersand.

It showed a superclub 20 minutes away from here.

Gumuhit ang ngisi sa labi ko.

Kabanata 3

I grew up hearing people admire me for my looks. They often said that my personality doesn't really go well to my looks. I got my mother's gentle face and my father's rage.

My skin is medium fair, and I always liked my hair on waist length. Maliit lamang ang ilong ko, bilugan ang mga mata at makapal ang kilay. My lips are shaped like a heart with a prominent cupid's bow. I was always said to have a doll-like feature.

I wore a red brallette under my black leather jacket and a tight skirt. Itinali ko sa messy bun ang buhok ko. I did a little makeup and grabbed my bag. I grabbed my keys to my white Jimney and left the house.

Nababaliw na siguro ako. Clubbing in a city I don't even know? Well, I lived in Manila. What's the worst to happen?

The club wasn't hard to find. I just have to follow the trails of people leaving a building drunk. Pinarada ko iyon sa isang tabi. Sa labas pa lamang ay nakita ko na ang mga taong lasing. Umikot ang mata ko.

I made my way inside. It was too crowded. Halos gumapang ako papunta sa bartender stool. What the hell?

"Give me a shot of Bacardi and lemon, thanks." I said.

A guy smirked at me while he was ordering a bundle of drinks. Ngumiti ako at sumimsim sa alak na hawak ko. Bumaba ang tingin ko sa ID lace niya. University of Baguio.

"Am I drunk, or are you real?" he asked.

Ngumuso ako. "Not bad," I complimented his pick-up line.

"Allen," inilahad niya ang kamay niya.

"Winona."

"Hulaan ko, SLU?"

Nanliit ang paningin ko. "UC."

"Whoa!" he laughed. "Nursing?"

"Psychology."

"Shit," humagalpak ang tawa niya. "Trauma ako d'yan, ah."

I smiled. "Too bad, then."

Actually, he didn't look like a mountain boy. I underestimated it. This one looked decent. Matangkad, malaki ang build ng katawan, malinis ang gupit at gwapo. He even looks like he has foreign blood.

"May kasama ka ba?"

Umiling ako. "I'm just here for a drink."

"Ganoon ba? Maybe you know some of my friends. UC din sila," he grinned.

"Uhm..." nagdalawang isip ako. Kahit gwapo siya, mukha pa din kaya niya akong isako at itapon lamang sa gilid.

"Don't worry, may girls naman doon. You'll have fun, I promise."

Allen paved the way for me. Lahat ng nakakasalubong niya ay tinatanguan siya na para bang palagi siya nakatambay dito. He looks like he knows everyone in this place. Kumakaway siya na parang mayor.

"Lupit mo talaga, Allen! Iba na naman 'yan!" Someone in the table we're approaching said.

There were four boys and two girls. Wala na masyadong ingay sa banda dito. But the light was still dim, and I couldn't recognize any of them.

Sa madilim na sulok, nakita ko ang pamilyar na mukha. Among all of them, he was the only one who didn't look like drunk and is darkly staring at me. He had a cigarette sticking on his mouth as he blew it off in the air. May kauntint kunot ang noo niya habang nakatingin sa akin.

I slowly smiled.

Mukhang hindi niya kasama iyong girlfriend niyang linta.

"Gago!" si Allen. "Si Winona! Taga-UC!"

Umikot ang mata ko at tumawa. I sat beside a guy who looked like he could punch the bottle of whiskey that Allen bought. He looked at me and raised his eyebrow.

"Phia?" he whispered. Nanliliit ang mga mata niya sa akin na para bang kinikilala ako ng maigi. He was drunk.

Binatukan siya ng katabi niya. "Winona, Riley, Winona."

He nodded and smiled at me. God, where am I?

A girl in front of me smiled. She has an angel face. Ang katabi niya ay medyo boyish.

"Hi! I'm Dheia! Do you want to sit here nalang?" she offered. I didn't hesitate. Tumayo ako at naupo na lamang sa tabi niya.

"Pasensya na, Winona. I would introduce you to them, but some of them are drunk!" Allen said.

"No worries..." I said.

"How do you know Allen?" the boyish girl asked me.

"Don't be rude, Jackie!"

"Ah!" Jackie smiled and offered me her hand. "I'm Jackie. So, how do you know Allen?"

"He just invited me to sit here," I said. "Wala naman akong kasama kaya... sumama ako."

"Ay? Gago talaga 'yon. Akala ko pa naman close na close kayo."

"Sa susunod, 'wag ka sasama sa kaniya," Dheia said and laughed.

I looked at Akiro. He sipped on a whiskey on his hand. Inaabangan ko siya na tumingin sa akin pero hindi niya ginawa. He held his nape and closed his eyes as he cracked his neck a bit. Nakapikit siyang tumawa sa biro na binitawan ng kaibigan niya.

"'Yung hapon, UC Psych din, Winona. Baka kilala mo," Allen said and smiled at me.

I grinned. "Yeah. We're classmates in some of our subjects."

"Talaga?" he asked. Nilingon niya ang kaibigan niya. "Kiro, classmates pala kayo ni Winona."

Akiro licked his lips and eyed at me. He shrugged. "I don't remember."

Kumunot ang noo ko.

Allen laughed. "Lasing ka ba? Kung kaklase ko 'yan, hindi ko 'yan makakalimutan."

"I just transferred, so I understand."

"Really? Saan ka pala galing?"

"La Salle."

"Whoa!" his friends cheered. "Lasallian!"

Riley growled with laughter when he realized something. "Psychology, you say? Bro! Another psych girl? Hindi ka na talaga natuto."

Jackie cut in, smirking. "Si Allen ‘yung gagawin nilang thesis topic nila. Effects of falling for the wrong guy."

"Puta," a tall man laughed beside Riley.

"Gago kayo!" Dheia said.

I laughed. I drank the whole shot of Bacardi in my hand. Ngumiwi ako at pinunasan ang bibig ko. Meanwhile, Akiro just sipped his drink, eyes fixed on Allen like he was lowkey enjoying watching him crash and burn.

"No, seriously, Allen's not that bad naman!" Dheia said and winked at his friend. Kinindatan din siya ni Allen.

"Type mo ba siya, Winona?"

"Jackie!"

I smiled. "He's cute."

"See!"

Allen laughed. Nilingon ko si Akiro. He was poking his cheek while looking at me like he was waiting for something.

"But I'm really on into dating right now," I continued.

"Doon ako nalungkot!" Riley laughed.

Jackie died out of laughter. "UC Psych, 2. Allen, 0."

"Pare, study first ka nalang muna."

"Putang ina mo, Juan." Allen said and chuckled. He didn't seem to be offended, though.

The laughter toned down when Akiro stood up. Kumagat ako sa lemon na binigay sa akin ni Dheia habang pinapanood siya. Yumuko siya at bumulong sa katabi niya.

"Una na'ko," he spoke. "May training pa'ko bukas."

"Sus!" his friends cheered.

He lifted up his middle finger as he grabbed his things and turned his back. Nataranta ako. I stood up, too.

"It's getting late na din, uh... I will go home na."

Dheia smiled. "Oh? Okay. We should hang out again next time!"

Tumango ako. "Sure!" kumaway ako. "Thank you, Allen."

Nakita ko lumusot si Akiro sa exit. Narinig ko pa ang iilang mga kantyawan nila kay Allen bago ako makaalis doon. May mga tao pa akong nakabungguan bago pa ako makalabas ng husto.

I coughed the smell of smoke and vape inside. I looked for Akiro, but I couldn't. May mga taong nakatambay sa labas at hindi ko na siya makita pa.

I walked until someone grabbed my hand. Nanlaki ang mata ko nang isandal ako sa malamig na pader. My eyes widened even more when I saw Akiro standing in front of me with his dark, sharp eyes.

His jaw was clenched as his hand held my arms. He smelled like a mixture of alcohol, smoke, and Jo Malone. Napahawak ako sa ulo ko. Matalim ko siyang tinignan.

"Aray, ha!" reklamo ko.

He clicked his jaw harder. "What do you want from me?"

Kumunot ang noo ko. "What? Nothing! I mean, have you seen my massages?"

"I know who you are," he whispered. "Whatever you want from me, you won't get it. Leave me alone."

Umawang ang labi ko. I swallowed hard. Was I obvious?

I cleared my throat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your father is running for mayor just like mine," he said. "You can't fool me into thinking this isn't coincidence."

Tinulak ko ang dibdib niya. "What are you trying to say, Akiro? Hindi ko alam ang sinasabi mo! I don't have a business to whatever my father does!"

"Really?" matabang na sabi niya. "So you'd want me to assume that enrolling here, getting close to me, is some kind of cute little accident?"

I swallowed hard. "Why would you think I'd make an effort in leaving a wonderful life in Manila just to come here and what? Make papansin to you?"

He poked his inner cheek and stared at me deeply in my soul. Nakipagtagisan ako ng tingin sa kaniya. Kumuyom ang palad ko. Wow, I lie really good. I can even look straight in this jerk's eyes and lie.

"If it's so amazing there, then why are you here?"

Nanliit ang paningin ko. Kung wala lang talaga akong balak sa kaniya, iisipin kong masyado siyang makapal ang mukha.

"That's not of your business!"

Akiro threw himself away from me. Malamig ang mga tingin niya sa akin.

"Find someone else to bug. Hindi ako interesado sayo. Maybe Allen would do." he sarcastically said and left.

Bumagsak ang tingin ko sa sahig. Hinawakan ko ang dibdib ko.

Fuck, that was close.

Kabanata 4

"How are you, Winona?" My father asked me over breakfast. I chewed my food perfectly and sipped on my morning milk.

"Good, Dad," I answered. "How's the campaign?"

"Well, it's starting, so I will be a lot more busier. So, if you need anything and I'm not here, you can ask Manang or just text me whatever you need."

Tumango ako.

He stared at me and had a question in his head. "How's being friends with the Ayasaki? Have you met him?"

I licked my lips. I sighed. "Yes, and he's smart, Dad. I don't think he's gonna want to be friends with me."

"You are pretty, Win. Of course, he wants to be friends with you."

"He has a clue about my intentions," sabi ko.

Tumaas ang kilay niya. "He is smart."

Bumuga ako ng hangin at pinagpatuloy ang pagkain ko. For the past few days, hindi na muli kami nagkatagpo ni Akiro. Although, we might see each other today since schedule ng parehas namin klase ngayon.

"I'm sure he'll like you if you approached him better, Winona," he said. "We need to show people that we don't see them as enemies."

He needs a clean slate. I know that. And I'm trying, okay? I just don't think I will keep my temper still. Nakita ko na ang ugali ng hayop na 'yon. We will never get along even how much I try.

I haven't got any friends yet. May mga kumakausap sa akin pero puro lalaki lamang iyon. Girls look at me like I was some kind of newbie that everyone hates. I don't really mind having no friends. Especially because the only friends I had were Shannon, pinsan ko pa siya.

"Good morning, Winona," a guy said when I entered the room. Ngumisi ako.

I was late. Wala pa doon ang professor pero nandoon na ang mga kaklase ko ngayong subject. They were all wearing their uniform. I wore mine over a white skirt and Mary Jane's shoes. Umalingasaw kaagad ang Miss Chanel na pabango ko noong pumasok ako.

"Winona," someone called me. "Daddy mo pala si Felix Lopez? 'Yong tumatakbong mayor?"

I looked at Akiro at the back. Magulo ang buhok at kulay green na university jacket ang suot. Nakahalukipkip at nakapikit siya. Matalim ko siyang tinignan. This jerk!

Ngumiti ako. "Yes."

"Wow, talaga? Iboboto ko Daddy mo para boto sakin!" he joked.

Tumawa ako. "That works!"

Dumilat ng kaunti si Akiro. He looked annoyed. Umigting ang panga niya at pinasadahan ako ng masamang tingin. I smiled at him and waved my hand.

I saw Darleen at the side with her girlfriends. Nilaglag ko ang ngiti ko nang makita ko siyang nakatingin sa akin.

The professor entered the room. Tuwid ang upo ko habang inaayos ang iPad ko sa lamesa ko para magtake-down notes.

Professor paced slowly in front of the class. "Okay, class, let’s start with a quick recitation. No pressure."

Half of the students groaned. I smiled widely.

"Diagnostic criteria for major depressive disorder," the professor said. "Anyone for ten points."

I raised my hand. May iilang nagtaas din ng kamay pero dahil ako ay nasa harapan, ako ang kapansin pansin.

"Lopez," the professor called.

I stood up. "Depressed mood most of the day, diminished interest in activities, weight or appetite changes, insomnia or hypersomnia, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, poor concentration, and recurof death."

"Very good," he remarked.

Tuwid akong umupo. Narinig ko ang ilang paswit mula sa likod. Hindi na ako nag-effort na lumingon. I wrote down my answer on my iPad.

The professor asked again. "How about Generalized Anxiety Disorder?"

Someone in the class answered something. Kumulubot ang noo ng professor, mukhang hindi nasiyahan doon kaya nagtaass muli ako ng kamay.

"Another answer from Miss Lopez. Yes?"

"Excessive anxiety and worry occurring more days than not for at least six months," I answered smoothly.

"Correct."

I had a satisfied smile on my lips. I study a lot. Ang iba din kasi sa nabanggit ay napag-aralan na namin sa klase noon. Sadyang nakatatak lang sa isip ko.

I could feel people were getting annoyed that I kept answering. But I didn’t care.

"Okay, let’s make it more interesting,"Professor said. "What’s one common feature of Borderline Personality Disorder?"

I raised my hand on that one. Walang nagtaas ng kamay bukod sa akin. Gosh, that's a basic question.

What is wrong with these people?

The professor sighed when he didn't see anyone raising their hands other than me. "Okay, Lopez."

"Unstable interpersonal relationships. They have this chronic fear of abandonment, real or imagined. That’s why they act impulsively para maiwasan ‘yung pakiramdam na iniiwan sila."

"Good answer," the professor said. He stopped for a while. "You have another answer, Miss Santos?"

Hindi ako umupo. I watched her smirk and looked at me. She stood up.

"Hindi ba technically it’s fear of rejection? That’s more accurate. Kasi abandonment and rejection, magkaiba ‘yan. Baka naman namali ka lang ng wording."

The class looked at me. Even the professor looked at me like it was a debate, and I was supposed to defend my answer. Ngumiti ako.

This bitch.

"Well, yeah, they’re different, but fear of abandonment is what the DSM lists. I’m literally quoting the manual."

She smiled at me even wider. "Baka naman nagkamali ka ng basa. It happens. Some people like to sound smart. Alam mo, wording matters."

"Or maybe, someone should read more." banat ko.

Everyone reacted like it was a Manny Pacquiao boxing or something. Tumawa ang iba. Some seems to agree with her and some thoughts about agreeing on me. Nilingon ko ang professor namin.

"Okay, both of you are— Mr. Ayasaki, you have an answer, too?" the professor said.

The room stilled. This guy usually doesn't speak in class unless called.

Nagtiim bagang ako. Akiro licked his lips and stood up wearing the poker face and smug look. Humalukipkip ako habang si Darleen ay nakangiti.

"It’s fear of abandonment. That’s the core criteria in BPD. Fear of rejection can overlap, but it’s not the main diagnostic point," he said and looked at me. "Miss Lopez is right."

"Exactly! Thank you, Mr. Ayasaki."

Darleen blinked, obviously not expecting to be corrected by him. Meanwhile, I raised my eyebrow. He sided with me. Which is, an obvious answer, because I'm right. He knows I'm right.

Mabilis natapos ang klase. I can see Darleen on my peripheral view who is killing me by her stares. Niligpit ko ang mga gamit ko. I was about to stand up when a hand was placed in my table.

Umangat ang tingin ko at nakita ko si Darleen iyon. A smug smirk was on her lips. Almost everyone left. Some are looking at us. I bit my tongue.

"You were really something earlier in class. Like... wow. You answered almost every single question prof

threw at us. Impressive," she said with a bitchy smile.

I pushed her hands off the table. Ngumisi ako. "Oh, I'm sorry. Should I ask for your permission to raise my hands next time?"

The sweetness in Darleen’s smile faltered for half a second before she continued. "I’m just saying… girls who try too hard to stand out usually end up being easy targets. It’s just advice. I wouldn’t want you looking desperate."

I stood up to match her. I am two inches taller than her. Basically, I was just looking down on her. I pouted at her.

"Aw, care enough to warn me?" I chuckled. "Don't worry, I'm not going to steal anyone's spotlight. That's silly. Hindi na tayo high-school. Whoever that would think that is just insane. Are you?"

Kumunot ang noo niya. She looked like I pissed her off which gave ma a bit of satisfaction. Hindi ko alam kung anong iniisip niya sa akin. Maybe because I look like I couldn't fight her. But I would.

"Darleen," a call from behind us. Parehas namin nilingon iyon.

Akiro has a sharp expression. He eyed me with his stone cold eyes. Tumaas ang kilay ko ng kaunti. Oh, now, they're back being lovers?

Darleen’s smile was back on. "I was just telling Winona something. Tara na?"

I grabbed my bag and iPad on my table. Hindi ko na sila pinanood na mauna sa akin. I marched out of the room, leaving them. But I felt a pair of eyes was still on me while I was leaving.

Kabanata 5

"I heard you're friends with Tito's competitor," Shannon laughed in the video call. "Is he making you do that?"

Umikot ang mata ko habang naglalagay ng fake lashes dahil papasok ako. "Obviously, Shan. And we're not friends. You'd find me crazy if ever I'd end up being friends with him."

"Him?" si Shannon ay parang napantig ang tenga. "So, he's a guy? Is he hot?"

I snorted. "Shannon, no. If being hot had levels, he'd be somewhere in the basement with the rats."

Tumawa ako sa sariling biro. Shannon laughed as well. "You're lying!"

"I wish I was," I shrugged. "Picture a guy who looks like he just lost a fight with a lawnmower."

"Gaga, ang lala!" she almost spit out her drink. "You are so mean!"

Nagbikit ako ng balikat. She would die if she saw him. Hindi naman iyon pangit. Fine, he can be handsome in some angles. Hindi ko lang talaga tipo ang mga suplado. Like, oo na, you're gwapo na! Atleast your attitude can be gwapo as well.

Isa pa, I don't like chasing people. If he hates me, I'd hate him harder. Hello? Ako na 'to. I don't chase for attention. Attention chases me.

Our classes together was alright. I still participated nicely. Every time I answer, masama ang tingin sa akin ni Darleen. Hindi ko siya bininibigyan ng atensyon. If she wants the attention so bad, she should answer correctly. Like me, perhaps.

"Exchange your paper, class." Our professor in our last subject said.

Pinasa ko ang papel ko sa likod. Paikot iyon. So, my paper should be at the last and the last paper would be mine. Which is the worst thing that could happen because Akiro and I exchanged paper.

Ngumisi ako. I pulled out my pink glittery ballpen for checking. His name was written in Japanese form. Which, hindi ko na kailangan manghula kung ano man iyon. Maliliit ang sulat niya at para itong Jokerman font.

Nanatili akong seryoso habang nagchecheck. My mouth hanged when he didn't miss anything. He got it all correct.

"I'll call the name and say their score. No one will return the paper yet!" sabi ng prof.

Umikot ang mata ko. Ano 'to? Highschool?

"Aguillar," he started calling.

"Ayasaki," napantig ang tenga ko nang tawagin iyon. Ofcourse it's A!

I cleared my throat. "50."

"Ayos!" some of his friends cheered at the back. "Perfect na din ako n'yan! Joke lang, prof!"

Tipid akong ngumiti at ipinasa ang papel ni Akiro. I eyed at him. He bit his ballpen while looking at me darkly. Humalukipkip ako. With all confidence, I know I perfected that, too.

"Lopez," Professor called my surname. Tumuwid ako ng upo at ngumiti kahit na wala pa sinasabing score.

"45."

Nanlaki ang mata ko. "What?"

Everyone stopped and looked at me. Kumunot ang noo ko at nilingon si Akiro. He eyed at me and stood up. I watched him walk pass me and give my paper to our professor. Tumayo ako dahil sa inis.

"Excuse me, sir. Can I check my paper?" sabi ko.

Tumaas ang kilay ni Akiro. I heard Darleen’s snort in the class. Wala akong pinansin. I grabbed my paper and looked at it. Kumunot ang noo ko.

"Miss Lopez, there's no need. I will re-check this after," sabi ng prof.

"These are right." I spoke with confidence.

Akiro tilted his head. There's a small smirk on his lips. Nagkatinginan kami.

"Corrections, Miss Lopez," Akiro whispered. "Corrections means wrong."

Umawang ang bibig ko. Hindi ko alam iyon! Besides, it's just a little correction. What the heck?

Tinignan ko ang professor. He checked my paper, too. Matalim kong tinignan si Akiro. I gritted my teeth.

"Listen to the instructions next time, Lopez," the prof said.

Akiro's eyebrows shot up. Embarrassment entered me as I looked at the class and everyone was looking at me, some are whispering and some are laughing, especially Darleen.

Tahimik akong naupo. I sighed. I can't believe this!

"Winona," Darleen called me after class.

I sensed that she stood behind my chair. Hindi ako lumingon. Well, on the bright side, I got two points higher than this frog.

Tumayo ako habang nakasabit ang bag ko at kinuha ang iPad ko. I raised my eyebrow and looked at the ugly frog infront of me.

She smiled at me, fakely. "Birthday party ni Joan sa sabado. Lahat ng kaklase natin ay pupunta. Well, it would be rude if we won't invite you. No offense, ha? Transferee ka naman din kasi."

I looked at Akiro. He grabbed his bag. Inihagis niya iyon sa balikat niya. He grabbed his cap on the table and wore it backwards.

I swallowed.

Tumikhim ako. "Why are you the one handing out the invites? Bakit hindi siya?"

Besides, sino ba si Joan? Dalawang tao lang dito ang kilala ko, hindi pa sila parehas kagandahan.

"Oh, she's the short haired one. She once borrowed you a pen, remember? Hindi mo siya pinahiram," she smirked.

I know she's trying to tell me that I shouldn't go. It was obvious. First, sinampal niya sa mukha ko na hindi naman dapat ako invited because I am what? Transferee. Secondly, she tries to make me feel bad about going dahil sa pagmamaldita ko roon.

"Oh, Joan!" I laughed. "I'd love to go. Thanks for the invite, Darleen. That's really so nice of you."

Her smile turned bitterly. Tumango lamang siya at pa-irap na umalis. I waved at her cutely as my smile faded.

Akiro stood infront of me after Darleen left. Umangat ang tingin ko sa kaniya. What is he, seven footer?

I raised my eyebrow. "Tinitingin-tingin mo d'yan? Umalis na 'yong girlfriend mo!"

He smirked. Masama ang tingin niya sa akin. "You're really going to that party, huh."

Humalukipkip ako. "Why do you care?"

"I don't," pumamulsa siya. "You do know they hate you."

I stared at him. I realized that maybe he just keeps the rude face on but he's actually aware of things here. Natawa ako sa isip ko.

"You think I care about your little girlfriend and her squad?"

"That makes it even more dumber."

Dumber?

"Good thing I didn't really ask for your opinion," I said and smiled.

"Didn't give it for free either," he said and left.

Umikot ang mata ko. Bitch. He's even bitcher than Darleen. What the heck.

Kabanata 6

It's a custome birthday party. I looked outside my car and saw people wearing different crazy customes. Umangat ang kilay ko at bumaba sa sasakyan ko.

I'm wearing a Jennifer's body cheerleader custome. Binalot ng lamig ang hita at tiyan ko. It's a cropped top and a low waisted skirt. Definitely, my celestal spine tattoo is showing. I straightened my hair and wore a dark make-up to match up.

"Hey," some drunk boy greeted me. Inismidan ko siya.

Pumasok ako sa loob. I don't plan to stay long. I just wanted to show Darleen that I could and I can show up here even if she hates me to the depths. She didn't know a Manila party girl until she saw it.

I saw the Joan she was talking about wearing fairy wings and custome. She hesitated to smile, but she did. Mukhang hindi talaga ako inaasahan na dumalo.

"Winona," she called me. "I'm glad you could come! You're... so hot."

I saw Darleen on the back. Umangat ang kilay niya at nabigla ng bahagya. She's a cowboy. Wearing a cowboy hat, white cropped polo shirt, skirt, and boots. Ngumisi ako at nakipagbeso kay Joan. Kunyari close kami.

"Happy birthday!" I gave her a gift. "That's Coco Chanel. I hope you like it."

"Oh, wow. Thanks!" she giggled.

"I didn't really expect you'd come," Darleen laughed. "Lalo na, syempre, wala ka naman halos kakilala dito."

Humalukipkip ako at sumandal sa bar stool na puno ng mga alak.

"No worries, Darleen. Everyone here is so friendly! Except for you, of course," I winked.

Joan laughed awkwardly. "Darleen, it's fine. I mean, Winona can meet everybody here."

I shrugged. Nagkatinginan kami ni Darleen. Ang ngiti niya ay napanis. Tumango lamang siya.

"I like your outfit," she said. Alam ko naman na hindi totoo 'yon. Kunwari ako na na-touch.

I pouted and looked at her. "Thanks! Well, not everyone can pull off that outfit. But hey, at least you tried."

Darleen raised her eyebrow. I chuckled as I grabbed a bottle of whiskey and removed the cap using my teeth. I chugged it.

Unlike in the parties I attended in Manila, this is a lot more chill. The music was loud out here but there's not a lot of dancing. Only eating and talking. It was boring.

"So, tell me, Winona. Are you single or...?" a friend of Joan said while I was dugging in with the cheese plater.

"Single."

"Really? Wala ka bang natitipuhan dito sa Baguio?"

Darleen laughed. "Of course, her type is different. Manila boys are kind of wild, you know. The men your mother warns you about. Right, Win?"

A devilish smile was drawn on my lips.

"I actually like someone," sabi ko.

"Really? Sino?" gigil pa talagang malaman ni Darleen kung sino ang nagugustuhan ko.

"Akiro," I said with confidence.

Everyone didn't talk. Nginuya ko ang cheese ng maigi habang pinapanood kung paano malaglag ang expression ni Darleen sa kaniyang mukha. I sipped on my whiskey bottle.

Her other friend cleared her throat. "Uh, Winona, Darleen, and Akiro are something. Hindi mo ba alam..."

I pretended to be shocked. I closed my eyes dramatically. "Oh, no! I'm sorry, Darleen. I really didn't know. Does Akiro know?"

"What?" Darleen gritted her teeth.

Joan shrugged. "Close lang naman sila ni Darleen pero hindi naman talaga sila. Hindi ba, Darleen?"

Mas lalo akong tumawa. Matalim ang tingin ni Darleen sa kaibigan niya. I couldn't stop smiling. Wow, this is the best party I've ever been to!

"Don't worry, Darleen. Hindi ko ugali mang-agaw. Especially because you're a friend," I sighed.

Humalukipkip si Darleen. "I'm sure you're not also a Manila slut."

I winked at her.

I was liking the whiskey but I could feel it coming down my veins. Kalaunan, umalis din ako sa bar stool. Para akong pinapatay ni Darleen sa tingin niya. I couldn't help but to laugh.

I walked through the crowd. Malakas na ang music dahil papalapit na ako sa speakers na naglalakihan. Some drunk people are dancing and fooling around. Umikot ang paningin ko at tumambay sa isang sulok.

"No way!" some dude beside me. "How'd you know my favorite character?"

Nilingon ko iyon. A guy was Joker with face paint and a missing top. Matangkad, maputi, may lahi. He was familiar. My face lighted up when I recognized.

"Alex?"

He laughed. "Allen!"

"Sorry..." I bit my lips.

His eyes wandered on me. He looked surprised. "So, Jennifer's body, huh? I heard you only kill boys. I'd volunteer as your meal tonight."

Humalukipkip ako. "Depends. Are you worth the calories?"

He shrugged. "Try it."

I laughed. "You're such a clown."

My eyes stopped when I saw the people he left behind him. Napawi ang tawa ko. I saw his friends. Puro lalaki iyon, ang iba ay hindi ko na kilala. A pair of eyes was like a bucket of ice pouring on me.

Akiro was topless.

Just wearing low-waist black pants that clung a little too well. His chest was broad, abs defined like they were drawn on, and his skin had that light glow that made him look like he belonged on a damn stage. His hair was slightly messy, his jaw sharp, and his shoulders... looked like trouble.

I had a trouble breathing as well.

"Who is he supposed to be?" I asked Allen without taking my eyes off that goddamn abs.

"Kiro? Magic Mike London," tumawa siya.

I bit my tongue. Umiwas ako ng tingin. I laughed pero late na iyon.

"So, how do you know the birthday girl?" he asked. "Hindi ko kasi kilala, eh. Akala ko inuman lang."

"Oh, Joan? We're classmates."

"Wala ka uli kasama?" Allen guessed.

I shrugged and laughed. Wow, I am so lonely.

Tumikhim ako. "Ikaw?" I asked when I obviously know the answer.

"Kasama ko mga glassmates ko," he laughed like he said some joke.

"Huh?"

"Glass, I mean, baso... ka-inuman?" kumamot si Allen sa ulo at hilaw na tumawa. "Alam mo, hayaan mo na. Basta ang mahalaga mas maganda ka kay Megan Fox!"

I laughed. I get his joke. It's just that... corny iyon.

"Iimbitahin kita pero we're all boys, though. If that's okay."

I sighed. I was about to reject it when I saw Darleen in the crowd. Obviously, gawking at Akiro herself. I hate to do this.

I smiled. "Sure! No problem."

We went to their table. I recognized some of his friends. Riley was wearing a jail outfit but he didn't wear it overall, a white sando was his top. One has a skeleton face and a... well, one didn't participate.

"Si Winona ulit, guys," pakilala sa akin ni Allen.

I sat infront of Akiro. He watched me stood sat infront of him. Binaba ko ang whiskey ko sa mesa, nakatuon ang mata ni Akiro sa bawat kilos ko. He looked annoyed but too tired to show it. May beer sa isang kamay niya, ang isa ay nakaakbay sa skeleton ang mukha.

"That's Klaus, Riley, and Juan."

I smiled. "Hello!"

"Mukha lang silang gago pero slight lang."

"Your girl friends aren't here," sabi ko kay Allen.

"Si Dheia, may lakad. Si Jackie, nand'yan kanina pero umuwi na."

Tumango ako. Nagkatinginan kami ni Akiro. He clicked his jaw and poked his inner cheek.

Klaus raised his eyebrow. "That's a drink you got there. Is that for us?" he asked while looking at the whiskey bottle I got.

"Uh, no. This one's mine."

"Damn," Riley laughed. "Ito ba 'yong nambasted sayo noong nakaraan, Allen?"

"Gago," si Allen.

Ngumisi ako. I sipped on my drink.

"Tahimik mo yata hapon."

Klaus, the skeleton face, smirked and looked at me. "Badtrip. Bakit kaya?" he said. His eyebrows shot up at me.

"Tss," Akiro stood up. "I'll get more beer."

Sinundan ko siya ng tingin. Nakapamulsa siyang naglakad. I saw how people reacted as he walked pass them. Girls wave at him and waits to be noticed. But he never does. Sinuklay niya ang buhok niya at yumuko para kumuha ng beer sa cooler.

I saw Darleen pushed herself to be close to him. She smiled and tried to talk to him. Akiro only looked at the beer on his hand. He said something. Hindi mahaba.

Darleen touched his arms. Tumuwid ako ng upo. Akiro said something and smiled a bit. Tumango siya at umalis na doon. Darleen couldn't stop her ugly face to smile. Nagkatinginan kami. Kumaway pa talaga siya sa akin.

It took a while for Akiro to come back. Nahila pa siya ng ibang mga lalaking kaibigan niya. He stood there for a while. Nakipagtawanan at nakipagkwentuhan.

"Winona?" Allen called me.

Nilingon ko siya. "Huh?"

"I said are you hungry? Kukuha ako ng pagkain kung gutom ka."

Umiling ako. "No, I'm good."

"Are you sure wala kang gusto?"

Riley laughed. "Wala nga daw gusto! Kahit ikaw, hindi!"

Allen glared at his friend. "Gago. H'wag mo ako idamay sa pagluluksa mo."

"Tangina ka."

Klaus laughed. Tumalim ang tingin ni Riley sa kaniya. "Makatawa amputa. Akala mo sinong hindi magbibigti noong iniwan."

Umangat ang kilay ni Klaus. "Fuck you, bro."

"Mayabang."

"If you and Primo fight, I'll definitely pick him over you."

"Gago ka ah?"

Tinitigan ko ang whiskey na nakalahati ko na. I was already tipsy because my vision was already wavy. Hindi ko na din masyado marinig ang sinasabi nila dahil lumakas pa lalo ang music.

I stood up. "CR lang," I said.

Halos madapa na ako para lang makatayo. I saw Darleen on the speaker area. She was laughing with Joan and their friends. She looked like she was having a good time. And I wasn't.

I cursed when I bumped into someone's bare chest as I was rushing into the restroom. Umangat ang tingin ko at nakita kong si Akiro iyon. He was looking down on me. Hinimas ko ang ulo ko.

He clicked his jaw. "You're drunk."

Umikot ang mata ko. "I'm not here for your lecture."

Maglalakad ako paalis pero humarang siya. Tangina naman, oo. Tinulak ko ang dibdib niya pero hindi iyon nagpatinag sa kaniya.

"I know you're just playing with my friend, there. You think he knows that?" he whispered.

"Excuse me?" I was offended.

He tilted his head. "You heard me. Don't include my friend to whatever game you're playing."

I took a step closer, voice low and sharp. "And what makes you think you can talk to me like that?"

"Because I’m not one of those idiots drooling over your face. And Allen? He’s too nice for your games."

My blood boiled. "Games? You don’t even know me, Akiro."

"Exactly," he snapped. "And I already don’t like what I see."

This asshole!

I saw Darleen at the back. She was looking at us. Kunot ang noo. A friend was handing her a drink but she pushed it away. Nakita kong bumaba siya doon at naglakad patungo sa amin.

My lips was pulled by a grin. Nilingon ko si Akiro. "I knew it. You want it to be you, Akiro."

He stared at me blankly. He clenched his jaw and shook his head out of disbelief. He was about to walk away but I held his nape.

I tiptoed and closed my eyes for a kiss. His lips was even softer than I imagined. I targeted his bottom lips. Hindi siya gumalaw. My lips brushed his lightlh at first, but I pulled him more for a deeper kiss.

My eyes opened to see Darleen. She was shocked. She stopped like she has seen a ghost. Doon pa lang ako bumitaw.

Ngumisi ako kay Darleen. I looked at Akiro who was staring at me darkly. Nakaawang ang labi niya. His lips got redder. I make sure to bite my lips that had been brushed by his.

I pulled myself to leave.

Mabilis ang tibok ng puso ko.

It was satisfaction to distroy Darleen, I was sure. Or maybe, something else I'd rather not know.

Kabanata 7

I was called on the guidance office because I wasn't wearing uniform like I was supposed to. Hindi ko alam kung may ikakamalas pa ang araw ko. So, I didn't have a choice but to wear it the next subject.

For some reason, I hate wearing matching clothes with other people. It's just my preference.

Pinatong ko ang pink knitted sweater sa puting uniform ko. It's a white top and white pants. My hair is tied in a perfect slick bun. Hindi ako nakapasok sa unang subject ko dahil dito.

I was almost late when I got there. I immediately saw Darleen at the back. I sat infront, as usual. She was with her smirking face. Mukha siyang daga.

Akiro wasn't in his seat. Absent siguro siya. Hindi ko naman alam, wala akong pakialam.

"Hi, Winona. You look good in white!" Joan greeted me. She's behind my seat.

Tumango ako. "I know. Thanks."

Ngumisi siya sa akin. I know she's just nice to me because I gave her an expensive gift. She's still in Darleen's pep squad.

"Like I discussed the last time, we will need to form a group today. Group of four. Apat lang!" sabi ng professor namin sa research.

Great. Umikot ang mata ko.

"Just remember, class. You will be with them until the end of the school year. So pick wisely," he said. "I will give you until the end of our time today. Write down your names and pass it in my office. Understood?"

Darleen raised her hand. "Sir, hindi pwede individual, right?" she smirked and looked at me.

"Strictly, no. 48 naman kayo. No one will be left out."

This bitch. I wanted to go individual. She knows I don't have friends!

Everybody started talking. Nagtayuan silang lahat. Ang tunog ng mga upuan at sigawan ng mga pangalan ng isa't isa. Everybody formed their circles with their chairs to brainstorm. Lahat ay mayroon nang grupo.

I sighed. I could do that research alone. I was about to raise my hand to tell it to the professor when Joan poked me at the back.

"Gusto mo ba sumali sa amin? Kulang pa kami ng isa."

Tumaas ang kilay ko. "Well, fine—"

"Joan!" Darleen called her. They were already seated. Two girls. Only two is missing.

"Si Winona, walang ka-grupo."

Sige, isigaw mo pa!

"Si Akiro pa ka-group natin, Joan. He's not here but I'll count him with us." Darleen pouted. "I'm sorry, Winona. We're full. But you'll manage. You're resourceful, right?"

Like I want to be in your group in the first place! I'd rather suck up with baduy people in this class!

"Yeah," I said and smiled.

"Guys, sino daw may kulang pa sa inyo? Winona needs a group!" Darleen said. "Maawa kayo sa kaniya."

I'm going to shave her head after this.

"Dito, Winona! Kulang pa kami ng dalawa!"

I looked at them and they're two boys on their group. The most noisy and annoying boys in class who always smirks at me like crazy. Ngumiwi ako. Oh, I'm fucked.

"See? Problem solved!" Darleen laughed. "You'll fit right in."

That last line stung more than I wanted to admit.

I picked up my bag and walked toward the boys without looking back, chin lifted high. I wasn't going to give Darleen the satisfaction of seeing her upset.

"Nice. Isa pa tayo!" one of the guys said, grinning as he pulled up an extra chair for me.

They seemed chill enough, the kind of guys who didn't really care who joined as long as they didn't have to do all the work themselves.

I sat down, brushing imaginary dust off the table, focusing on the professor talking in front. My stomach was knotted, but I kept my expression calm. Alam kong pagsisisihan ko ito pero ano ba ang magagawa ko?

"H'wag kang mag-alala, Winona. Magaling si Edward! Matalino 'to!"

Ngumisi ako. "Talaga..." bumagsak ang ekspresyon ko.

"Oo 'no? Research lang 'yan!" Edward said. "Gusto mo sa amin tayo gumawa. May printer kami doon para hindi tayo masyadong magastos."

Tipid akong tumango. I honestly don't care. But this will do. The last person I'd rather have as groupmates is Darleen. Mabuti na ito. Mapagtitiisan ko naman siguro.

Everyone has their groupmates already. May ibang nag-uusap usap pa pero kami ay kulang pa din ng isa. So is Darleen's group but they are settled because of her boyfriend. Isa pa iyon! I would rather stay here!

The door opened. It was Akiro.

He brushed his newly showered hair. Isang strap ng bag niya ay nasa kaliwang balikat. He was wearing

his white uniform under a thick oversized black hoodie. His expression was usual, cold and uninterested.

He looked at the class and wondered why we're scattered like ants. Nilingon ko si Darleen na nagtaas ng kamay. He went straight to professor who probably explained the situation.

"Okay, Rica and Akiro, wala pang group." Professor said.

I stared at the nerd girl on the side. She was threw out by her friends dahil puno na sila. She had to be the one to get kicked out. She's probably the worst person to be a group mate. What the heck.

"Dito, sir kulang po ng isa!" ang isang groupmate ko, si Mico.

Darleen smirked. "Akiro, here! I wrote down your name already!"

Nagtama ang paningin namin ni Akiro. Humalukipkip ako at umikot ang mata ko. Honestly, swerte na ako. I would rather be alone and lonely than be groupmates with them. Titiisin ko nalang dito sa mga monggol na ito.

I stared at my iPad and started brainstorming about possible topics we had. Wala akong aasahan sa mga ito!

I heard the chair screeched and was placed on my side.

Umangat ang tingin ko. Nakita ko si Akiro na hinagis ang bag niya sa tabi ko. His eyes was focused on me. His jaw clicked as he sat beside me.

Hindi natanggal ang tingin ko sa kaniya.

"Okay, Rica, looks like you're with Miss Santos," I heard the prof said. "Everything's settled then. Finalize your group and pass your paper today."

I glanced at Darleen. She was looking at us. Kulubot ang noo at halos lumabas ang usok sa ilong niya at tenga. Hindi ako kaagad nakapagreact.

I didn't know if I will be glad or get mad.

"Ayos! Sa atin si Akiro!" Mico rejoiced. "Ako na magsusulat ng pangalan natin."

Akiro grabbed the pen from Mico. "Ako na," he said.

I gritted my teeth and sighed. "What the hell are you doing?" I whispered for only us to hear.

He grabbed the paper and started writing. I watched his hand grip the paper nicely. He started numbering first.

"Nothing," he whispered back.

Umikot ang mata ko. Muntik ko na siya makurot.

"Can you not be in this group?"

He licked his lips. He stared at me. My face was like five inches away. I could smell his Jo Malone perfume and gel shampoo.

"Saan mo ako gusto?" he asked, sarcastically.

I rolled my eyes. "Your girlfriend? Are you trying to get me killed?"

"Whoever told you she was my girlfriend?" he tilted his head.

So, hindi?

Ano ba, Winona! Why do I even care!

"Kahit na!" inis na bulong ko.

Pinanood ko kung paano niya isulat ang pangalan ko, unang una.

Lopez, Winona Jean L.

Even my middle name was correct.

He looked at me after writing my name. He clicked his jaw and leaned closer to me. Nakita ko kung paano kami panoorin ng dalawa naming ibang kagrupo. I swallowed hard.

"You think you'd get away after the crap you pulled last time?" he whispered huskily. "I don't think so."

My throat ran dry.

I watched him write his name under my name. It was in Japanese. A perfect one. He licked his lips and gave the paper back to Mico after writing our names.

For a second, I forgot why I was mad. And that annoyed me even more.

Kabanata 8

Is he insane?

I don't even think about that kiss anymore. I've kissed men before and never see them again, but no one ever acted like this. I mean, halik lang iyon. Kung makapag-react siya ay parang ngayon lang siya nahalikan!

I was on my way to the gym I found online when I saw an article online with my father's name. I stopped driving on the side of the road.

Baguio Mayoral Candidate Felix Lopez Strengthens Ties with Ayasaki Family for a ‘Clean and Peaceful’ Election.

I tapped the article open and felt my blood pressure rise with every sentence I read.

"Both families have shared a long friendship built on mutual respect and trust. Sources say that their children, Winona Lopez and Akiro Ayasaki, are particularly close, mirroring the strong political alliance between their parents."

I slammed her phone onto the passenger seat, half tempted to throw it out the window. Close? Since when?! The only thing I wanted to be close to Akiro with was maybe my fist.

"What is it, Winona? I'm kind of busy here," bungad ni Daddy noong tumawag ako.

I sighed. "Dad, I saw the article."

He paused. "Good. What do you think?"

"Dad, please, I already told you. I don't think it will work. Akiro and I will never be friends. Like ever."

"Kinakausap mo ba?"

"Hello?" umirap ako. "Like I have a choice? He's my groupmate in our research!"

"Which is good, Winona," sumaya ang boses ni Daddy. "Invite your groupmates in our house to do your research. It's spacious and Manang can cook you foods."

"I don't know, Dad." I gave up. He's never going to let this go.

"We'll talk about this later over dinner, Win. Please, just be nice to him. Maybe you just scare him sometimes," he said before ending the call.

Bumuntong hininga ako. He just doesn't stop, is he?

Pinarada ko ang sasakyan ko sa harapan ng building. I tried so hard to find a gym that actually has air-conditioning. I wore my Alo black pair of sportswear. A sports bra and a stretchy leggings with my white Adidas shoes. I braided my hair and wore a pair of Airpods.

Kinuha ko ang gym bag at tumbler ko. I went inside and immediately greeted by a receptionist.

"I'd like to avail a membership here," I said. The guy smiled at me.

He nodded. "Nandito po ang price range namin."

"Alright. Do you accept card?"

"Yes, ma'am. Would you like a personal trainor, ma'am?"

"Not really. I've had a routine before. I don't really need a trainor."

The guy nodded. "Recently?"

Tumikhim ako. "Last... three months."

Ngumiwi siya at tumango. "Since you've been off for a while, it might help with your reconditioning, someone to adjust your program, check your form, and make sure you don't push too hard too fast. Especially since most returning clients usually struggle with that."

Tumaas ang kilay ko. That makes sense and I hated it.

I shrugged. "Fine. Give me your best one."

Ngumiti siya. "Pwede kita i-assign sa senior trainers namin, ma'am. Swerte mo, may slot ngayon 'yong isa."

Tipid akong ngumiti. I looked at my watch. I settled my payments first and then the receptionist left to call whoever coach was avaiable.

Ilang minuto pa ay bumalik ang receptionist. I was expecting someone else but I almost ran when I saw Akiro behind him. Namilog ang mga mata ko.

Wearing a fitted black dri-fit shirt and loose joggers, towel draped casually around his neck. His muscles were perfectly molded. Para iyong pumuputok sa braso niya. Magulo ang buhok niya at makintab ang leeg at braso dahil sa huling sets niya sa loob. Even so, he didn't look dugyot with all of it. He even looked better.

"This is Coach Kiro, ma'am..." the receptionist stopped and thought about my name that I never gave.

Akiro's jaw clenched. "Winona," he said.

"You work here?" iritado ang tono ko.

The receptionist curiously looked at us. "Magkakilala pala kayo, Kiro?"

Akiro poked his inner cheek and grabbed a fresh towel on the side of the front desk. He wiped his arms while looking at me, rudely. Nanlilisik.

"Particularly close," Akiro said meaningfully. Nabasa niya siguro ang nasa article.

"Well, great!" The receptionist handed him a clipboard. "This is the waiver and personal training terms. We just need you to sign this before we activate the program. Coach Kiro will orient you."

"Sandali. Hindi pa ako pumapayag!" I said. "Don't you have other trainor or anything?"

Umangat ang kilay ni Akiro at humalukipkip. The receptionist looked uneasy.

"Fully booked na din, ma'am, 'yung ibang coach," he said.

Kumunot ang noo ko. This is honestly the most annoying thing that could happen. Matalim kong tinignan si Akiro.

He clenched his jaw and pointed a couch near us. "Sit."

"And you are so warm and loving," sarkastiko kong sinabi.

"This isn't a spa, Miss Lopez. Gusto mo lambingin kita?"

Unggoy!

I sat down. I watched him seat beside me. He spreaded his legs widely. Tinukod niya ang siko sa parehong hita niya at binasa saglit ang nakasulat sa folder. He grabbed a pen and signed something, his neat and clean signature. Maya maya pa ay nilagay niya ang folder sa hita ko.

Sumandal siya at humalukipkip. He just glanced at me sideways.

"Read it carefully. I don’t like repeating myself during sessions. No skipping warm-ups, no pretending to faint para makaiwas sa reps."

I opened the folder angrily. "I actually do work outs, Akiro."

He lifted his eyebrow. "I trained a lot of girls like you."

"Like what?"

"Maarte," sabi niya na walang pigil.

I slapped his arm with the folder. "Hindi ako maarte!"

He scoffed.

I read the waiver and signed it after. The receptionist showed me where the locker is and where I could put my stuff. Nilagay ko doon ang mga gamit ko bago ako sumunod kay Akiro.

I saw him fixing the weights on the wall. Nakita ko din kung paano malagkit ang tingin sa kaniya ng ilang mga babae. I shook my head.

Akiro looked at me when I started stretching on his side. He paused while looking at me. Nilingon ko siya at masamang tinignan.

He clicked his jaw and looked away. "Since it’s your first day back, we’ll start with a light warm-up. You used to work out before, right?"

"Yes. But don't underestimate me."

"I wasn't planning to go easy on you."

Umikot ang mata ko. Dumaan siya sa harapan ko. He smelled good. Ano ba? Pabango ba ang pawis niya. I'm sure I won't smell like him after hours of work out.

He hid a smirk and pointed at the treadmill. "Five minute jog. Then we'll do mobility drills."

Umakyat ako sa threadmill at medyo nagyayabang. Pinindot ko ang start. I felt his eyes on me, like a hawk observing his prey. Hindi ko masyado iyon pinansin.

I glanced at the big mirror on the side and saw him looking at me. Nakahalukipkip at madilim ang tingin sa likod ko. I stopped after the first two minutes.

"You're staring," she said flatly.

"I'm coaching," he corrected, hands in his pockets. "Making sure you don't pass out after two minutes."

"Mayabang," bulong ko at muling pinindot ang start para tapusin iyon.

Hingal ako matapos matapos. But it wasn't tiring. Akiro poked his inner cheek after I landed back on my feet. I smirked at him.

Sinundan ko siya sa stretching area. I was pretty hyped up.

"Arms up," he said. Tinaas ko kaagad ang kamay ko na para bang aso niya ako na bigla nalang inutusan.

There's a huge mirror infront of us. He held my arms. Kumurap kurap ako. I felt him squeeze me a little bit. His knees pushed my leg to open wide. Nanuyo ang lalamunan ko.

He looked at me in the mirror. Nagkatinginan kami. His eyes were intense. Mine was nervous.

"Relax your shoulders," he whispered.

I swallowed. "I am relaxed."

"No, you're not..."

I hate it. I hate it so much.

His hands was assisting my body every stretch. His hands held my shoulders smoothly. Imbis na ma-relax, kinakabahan ako! Fuck this!

Akiro licked his lips after I did my stretching. "Bodyweight squats. Let's see if your legs still remember how to work."

Nilingon ko siya. It didn't have a bastos meaning to him but to me, it did. Umiwas ako ng tingin. I had a quick water break after that. Akiro waited for me to get back before he punished me again.

The first set was easy. The second set, I felt the burn. And of course, Akiro was there, counting out loud like he enjoyed watching me struggle.

“Ten… eleven…” He leaned down a little, meeting my gaze with that annoying smirk.

I glared at him. "You're loving this, are you?"

His lips was pulled in a smile. "You have no idea..."

I groaned. I started shaking. Hindi ko na halos iyon matapos. I was pretty disappointed.

"Don't drop," he whispered softly. "You'll ruin the image we built earlier. You can do it..."

I didn't drop. Hirap man, pero natapos ko. Tickles of sweat was dropping on my forehead. I'm pretty sure I look dugyot na.

"Fifteen. Not bad, princess," he said.

Nanuyo ang lalamunan ko. I cleared my throat. "Water... uhm break."

Maraming water break pa ang ginawa ko. Sumandal ako sa poste habang pinapanood si Akiro na mag-ayos ng mga gamit doon.

I raised my eyebrow when I saw a woman went to him. Kanina pa iyon nakatingin kay Akiro habang pinapahirapan ako. They may know each other since he was letting her touch his biceps for some reason.

Pabagsak kong binaba ang tumbler ko at naglakad patungo doon.

"I'm ready," I said out loud.

Akiro looked at me. The woman did, too. She raised her eyebrow.

"Oh, you're training? Bago ba?" she asked. Which was obvious since she has been lurking since I got here.

Tumango si Akiro. "Maya nalang, Julie."

Hindi ako ngumiti. Sinundan ko ng tingin ang babae. Bumalik ang tingin ko kay Akiro at nahuli siyang nakamasid sa akin.

"Done resting?" tanong niya.

"Yes. Ikaw? Oh, sorry, na-istorbo ko pa yata ang landian break mo."

Humalukipkip si Akiro habang nakatingin sa akin. Umikot ang mata ko sa kaniya at tumalikod. I felt his stare at my back. I didn't mind.

Gusto ko magdabog.

I felt irritated. Not with the sets. Not with the coaching. Something different.

Kabanata 9

Mico Dela Cruz added you in a group.

"Okay na, Win. Na-add na kita sa group," Mico said.

Akiro sat infront of me. We're tasked to assign leader in the group today. Also, we have to brainstorm different titles that the professor need to be checked. Ofcourse, papunta pa lang sila, pabalik na ako. I have ten different title proposals.

Edward sat beside me. I scribbled on my iPad. Humilig si Edward para silipin ang ginagawa ko. Hindi ko siya pinansin.

"Wow, ang sipag mo pala talaga. D'yan ka na nag-rereview?" Edward was amazed. "Grabe, tabi nga tayo kapag exam!" biro niya.

Akiro shifted on his seat. "Time's running. Ano? Hindi pa ba magsisimula?"

Umikot ang mata ko.

"We need to assign a leader," I said. "Someone that should be reliable, also with resources. We could use different locations but ofcourse, the leader should have computer, printer and books."

Edward smiled. "Ikaw na, Win!"

"O kaya si Kiro," Mico said. "Magaling siya sa research noong highschool."

I smiled sarcastically. "Well, clearly, this isn't high-school anymore."

Humalukipkip si Akiro at mataman akong tinignan. "Busy ako. Hindi ako pwede."

Lumawak ang ngiti ko. I bit my tongue and sighed dramatically. "That makes it me, I guess."

Kunyari hindi gusto.

Akiro smirked with my reaction like he knew it himself.

I showed my iPad to them. Umangat ang kilay ni Akiro at pinasadahan lamang iyon ng tingin. My two other groupmates read it properly. Tumango tango si Mico na akala mo naiintindihan niya talaga.

"I wrote down my title ideas," sabi ko. "Kung meron kayong ginawa, much better. Pero kung wala... whatever."

Edward chuckled. "Ang dami, ah. Ipapasa natin lahat?"

Tumaas ang kilay ko. "Nakinig ka ba kanina?"

His laugh became sadder. I sighed. "We need to pick three, guys. Pwede tayo mamili dito sa ginawa ko. And then, whatever the majority picks, 'yon nalang ipapasa natin."

Akiro poked his inner cheek and grabbed my iPad. Naputol ang sasabihin ko sana. Hinayaan ko siya.

Nakahalukipkip siya habang ang isang kamay ay hawak ang iPad ko. I watched how his cold brooding eyes read every line.

After a minute or two, he placed my iPad back. Ngumisi ako.

"So?" I asked.

He shrugged. "All of them are too broad. No feasibility."

Kumunot ang noo ko. "Binasa mo ba ng maayos? I wrote ten, Akiro."

Tumango siya. "Political pressure? Cognitive dissonance? Paano natin gagawan ng sample size ‘yan? Gusto mo isama buong Pilipinas?" he said calmly, not even raising his voice.

That was my best ideas I got!

"You want something like ‘Why College Students are Stressed?'" I mocked, rolling my eyes.

"I'm saying we should trim it down," he said.

Edward looked nervous. "Siguro pwede naman tayong gumawa ulit. May isang oras pa naman tayo."

Mico laughed. "Love and war nalang kaya?"

Akiro clenched his jaw and combed his hair backwards. "Everybody will write their ideas down. And we'll see what happens."

"Hindi ikaw ang leader."

"Clearly, our leader isn't doing her job perfectly," Akiro answered me.

Fuck this!

Humalukipkip ako at hinayaan sila. I watched Akiro scribble a paper and pen. Hindi man lang siya nag-isip ng matagal. Matalim ang tingin niya sa papel na para bang may ginagawa itong masama sa kaniya.

The two boys had trouble trying to think for even one. Umirap ako. Nagkatinginan kami ni Akiro. I had a feeling he's done. I grabbed his paper.

He kept on biting on his pen while watching me read the titles he wrote.

The interplay of academic pressure, emotional regulation, and coping mechanisms among college students. Perceived stress levels and coping strategies among working and non-working psychology students.

Well, it's... nice.

Kumurap kurap ako. "Bakit dalawa lang?"

He licked his lips. "We'll do one from your lists."

"Akala ko ba ayaw mo?"

Umigting ang panga niya. "We'll give it a try."

"Fine!"

Sa huli, title ni Akiro pa ang napili ng professor namin. I would propose all of my titles but I was just pissed. Everyone in our class had to stay because the professor couldn't pick a nice one from their group. Kami lang ang may maayos na nagawa. Or atleast, Akiro.

I wanted to skip going to the gym but ofcourse, I paid and everything so I didn't really have a choice.

Pink na longsleeved Alo top ang suot ko at skirt lang. I tied my hair up in a sleek bun and drove to the gym.

Ofcourse, Akiro was there. Wearing a white fitted top and gray pants. I was thirty minutes early.

I saw him training a girl. It was the girl flirting with him. Hinawakan niya ang baywang nito habang nakabitin. Makurba iyong babae. She has big boobs and butt. Very curvy.

"Winona?" someone called me from behind.

Umangat ang kilay ko. "Allen!"

He was alone. Sando na butas sa gilid at shorts ang suot. His energy wasn't like the last time. He looked at Akiro inside then me.

"Nag-gym ka pala dito," tumikhim siya. "Si hapon ba coach mo?"

I smiled and nodded.

"Mukhang busy yata coach mo ngayon," tumawa siya.

I shrugged. "Well, I'll just hit the gym alone muna."

"Samahan kita," sabi niya. "Kung okay lang."

"I don't mind," I smiled.

I washed up at the locker room before I went out. Akiro was still busy. Hindi pa siguro niya ako nakikita. My eyes lingered at their back. They were laughing about the girl failing at some sets.

I made a face.

"Lika na, Win..." Allen called me to the threadmill.

Sumunod ako doon. Magkatabing threadmill ang pwesto namin. I set my speed, ginaya niya lang iyon. The first minute was smooth.

"Ganda ng form mo pala," Allen complimented.

"I've been in gym for a year but I stopped so, I doubt that."

"Sus. Parang 'di naman..."

I smiled.

Tumikhim ako. "How long have you been friends with Akiro, anyway?"

Allen slowed down his speed to think. "Tagal na din. Hearthrob ng UC 'yan 'nong high-school, eh, kaya kilala ko na. Knows mo ba?"

Umangat ang kilay ko at tumawa. "So, matagal na kayong... glassmates?" I laughed.

Allen scoffed. "Kind of. Nagkakasundo din talaga kami sa alak. Pero ah, by the way, lakas mo uminom, gar."

"Huh?" hindi ko naintindihan ang tawag niya sa akin pero tumawa ako. "Well, I live in BGC. So you should know."

"If you've been here earlier, you could've met some of our friends. Magkakasundo siguro kayo ni Quinnzel," he said.

I licked my lips and smiled. Allen is a sweet guy. I mean, I think more than his looks, he could pull girls with his humor. I can't remember if I even dated a guy with an actual funny humor. Parang wala pa!

Isang tikhim sa likod ko ang nagpatalon sa akin. Allen stopped his speed and so did I. Parehas naming nilingon si Akiro na nakapaymewang sa likod namin.

His dead-ass stare went into Allen first. He raised his eyebrows, a little bit irritated. Allen laughed out loud which I didn't get.

"Putang ina mo talaga, hapon!" Allen cursed. Hindi ko naintindihan kung nag-uusap ba sila sa tingin nila.

Akiro clicked his jaw. "Kunin ko na."

Allen shrugged and shook his head. "Lugi. Ako nauna."

Humalukipkip ako at naunang naglakad paalis sa theadmill. I felt him behind me.

Nilingon ko siya. "You were busy so I did a run with Allen. Hope that isn't a problem since you've been hanging out with miss curvy over there."

Pinasadahan ni Akiro ang dila niya, "You were early. Hindi pa tapos ang session niya, dumating ka na."

"Kasalanan ko?" I said, annoyingly.

Umigting ang panga niya at tinitigan ako. "Next time, you can wait for me in the lobby or update me if you'll be here early."

Tumalikod ako kay Akiro para dumiretso sa warm-up section. I walked and before I could reach there, he catched my wrist. He pulled me to face him.

Hinigit ko ang hininga ko.

He clicked his jaw. "I'll end her session with me tomorrow. Ipapasa ko siya sa ibang coach."

Umawang ang labi ko.

Kumurap ako. "Bakit?"

"So I'd only train you," sabi niya.

Kabanata 10

I can't remember the last time I was stressing out over my academics. Studying for me is something I'm good at. I was always good, not just good but the best in school. Ang simpleng research ay hindi ako pinagpapawisan.

Pero ngayon, nararamdaman kong pumipitik ang sentido ko sa thesis na ito.

I invited my groupmates in our house to do the first chapters of our thesis. I hate to admit but I actually needed their help about this one.

Si Mico at Edward ang unang nakarating. We're studying in our open garden patio. We have a wide area, usually dito din nagmemeeting si Daddy or tumatanggap ng bisita.

Humalukipkip ako. "Is Akiro coming or not?"

"Ewan, Win. Baka hindi nagbasa sa gc."

"Sure ka ba na FB niya iyon? Bakit parang hindi."

Umirap ako at binuksan ang groupchat namin.

Winona : Alisin ko na 'yang hindi pupunta! I don't want to hear excuses! We've talked about this last time and we agreed that we're free this day!

"Shet, buti pala ang aga ko kanina..." Edward laughed.

Pumasok ang puting Ford Everest sa garahe namin. I stared at it. There's a lot of cars going in and out here. Huminto ito at maya maya pa ay bumukas ang pinto.

Napawi ang kunot sa noo ko nang makita ko si Akiro na bumaba doon. He was wearing an oversized black shirt and dark pants. He combed his hair and grabbed a laptop from the back.

He walked towards us like he had seen us here way before he entered. Nagkatinginan kami. Madilim ang tingin niya sa kasama ko pero mas lalo sa akin. Masama din ang tingin ko sa kaniya. Kulang nalang ay kumulog bigla.

"Sakto timing mo, Kiro!" Mico said. "Chapter one na kami."

He threw the throw pillow beside me. Umupo siya doon. I smelled his strong Jo Malone perfume. Umigting ang panga niya at inis na kinuha ang unan na hinagis niya. He placed it on my lap.

What?

I looked at my hello kity pair of tube top and shorts. Matalim ko siyang tinignan.

"You're late, Akiro," puna ko.

He clicked his jaw. "I had some errands."

"Last time na nagmeeting tayo, I asked everyone if you have errands. You said no."

Umangat ang kilay niya. "Biglaan."

Umirap ako at pinakita sa kaniya ang mga nagawa namin. "We're still stuck here. I gave Ed and Mico tasks—"

"Ed?" he asked, more like annoyed.

Edward smiled. "Pre, ako 'yon."

"You're nickname basis now?"

"Ano ba?" iritado kong sabi. I sighed. "As I was saying, I gave them their tasks pero hindi pa sila tapos." matalim kong tinignan ang dalawa, umiwas sila ng tingin at tumitig sa laptop.

Akiro didn't seem to let go of his anger. "What is it? Ako na gagawa."

"Yown!" Mico laughed.

I glared at the two useless brains here. I sighed. "Let them do it. Hindi sila matututo kapag hindi sila gumawa."

"It's fine. Ibigay mo na lang sa kanila 'yong madadali."

"I said no, Akiro," sabi ko. "Let them do it."

Umigting ang panga niya. "Mas matatagalan tayo—"

"Mas matatagalan tayo kung palagi mo akong kinokontra!"

"Hindi kita kinokontra."

I scoffed. "Do you really treat me as a leader of this group?"

Akiro sighed. He clicked his jaw. "Fine." he gave up.

I know he has a point but I have a point as well. These brainless idiots wouldn't know how to do a proper research and they will never do. Tanga na nga, hahayaan pang magijg tanga!

Mico nervously laughed. "Uh, break muna kaya? Lunch na din, eh..."

Edward grinned. "Ako nalang magluto pancit canton. Kumakain ka ba 'non?"

"No," umikot ang mata ko.

"Uh, sige. Bibili nalang kami ni Mico ng lunch!" Edward suggested. "Ano ba mga kinakain mo, Win?"

"Win?" Akiro whispered that he thought he's the only one who heard.

"Anything," sabi ko. "Subukan niyo lang umuwi."

"Doon nalang sa Good Taste," Mico said. "Kami na bahala, Win!"

Umikot ang mata ko at tinaboy ko sila gamit ang kamay. I felt them left. Wala na doon ang atensyon ko kung hindi sa thesis paper namin.

The air was a lot more quiet without the two brainless idiots. Ngayon, parang kahit ang pag-iisip ni Akiro ay naririnig ko na. I stared how his leg was brushing on mine. Nanindig ang balahibo ko at umusog ng kaunti.

Hinilot ko ang sentido ko at pinikit ang mata.

"Rest," I heard Akiro whisper. "I'll do the rest."

"H'wag mo ako kausapin."

"Let's not fight," he took a deep sigh.

Dumilat ako. I saw him looking at me. Umigting ang panga niya.

"You annoy me, Akiro. Obvious ba?" iritado kong sabi. "I thought you weren't even interested in me. You made it clear from the start. And yet here you are. In my group."

Umiwas ng tingin si Akiro sa akin. "Both of our father is competing with each other. I was just being careful."

"So ngayon, interesado ka na sa akin?" humalukipkip ako. "Why? Because I'm not trying to be a spy for my father?"

"I didn't say that."

"But that's what you're implying-"

"Baby," malumanay niyang sabi. "Can we please not fight?"

Hindi ako nagsalita. I swallowed hard. Tumingin ako sa ginagawa ko at pinagpatuloy na lamang iyon.

Akiro licked his lips. Iniwan niya ang ginagawa niya. His hand gripped my Macbook and the other was behind the couch. His chest was close to my shoulders and I could hear his breath on my ear.

Tumikhim ako. Binuka ko ang bibig ko pero walang lumabas doon.

I watched his fingers scribble on the things I wrote. Kinagat ko ang dilat ko na para bang irereset ko ang dila ko.

"Can you move? Kailangan talaga nakadikit ka sa akin?"

Tumaas ang kilay niya. "Can't see."

Umiling ako. Well, maliit ang mata niya. That's fair, I guess?

"It just need a little polish," bulong niya. "This paragraph should be here..." tinuturo niya.

Wala na sa screen ang mata ko kung hindi nasa mukha niya. I stared how perfect his features are. His eyes were thin, his nose and jaw are sharp and his lips were red and bouncy.

"Baby," sabi niya at tinitigan ako.

Kumunot ang noo ko. "Don't you dare call me that!"

Umangat ang kilay niya. "What do you want me to call you? Win? You let those boys call you that already."

"What are you trying to say, Akiro?"

"I want my own nickname for you."

Surprisingly, I couldn't react. It was like my knees were jelly as well as my tongue.

Na-utal ako. I can't pronounce anything. Ano ba, Winona Jean! Pipe ka ba? Napipe ka na?

Tumikhim ako. "I hope you're not trying to flirt with me. Uunahan na kita, hindi tayo bagay."

Namangha ang mga mata niya sa akin. Pinanood ko kung paano bahagyang lumiit ang mata niya habang tumatawa. I was mesmerized. I feel like it was the first time that I saw him laugh.

He poked his inner cheek with his tongue. "Why so?"

Tumikhim ako. "Kasi mataas standard ko."

"I do not pass your standard?"

Hindi ko alam kung ilang beses ako nagdasal na sana bumalik na iyong dalawang gunggong. Masusugat na ang labi ko kakakagat habang pinapanood si Akiro na gawin ang bagay na dapat ako naman talaga ang gagawa.

"Kung hindi mo napapansin, aside from our father, we are also rivals." ngumiti ako ng sarkastiko.

Sumandal siya at tumaas ang kilay niya sa akin.

After long minutes, Mico's car arrived. Tinulak ko si Akiro sa tabi ko. Inayos ko ang damit ko at ang unan sa hita ko.

I glanced at Akiro who was offended by the way I pushed him.

"Nandito na lunch natin!" Edward said and raised a bag of foods.

"Oh, ayos ka lang, Winona? Para kang naiihi."

Tumikhim ako. "No! No, I'm fine."

"Talaga?" sinulyapan niya si Akiro. "Akala ko talaga maaabutan namin kayo na nagbubugbugan."

Oh, I wish!

Akiro licked his lips and stood up to prepare the food. Tinabi niya ang mga gamit. Edward smiled at me and placed a paperplate infront of me. Akmang lalagyan niya ako ng kanin pero kinuha ni Akiro ang plato ko at siya na ang naglagay ng kanin ko.

Matalim niyang tinignan ang kagrupo. "Lagyan mo 'yung akin. Ako na dito."

Kumamot sa batok si Edward.

Whatever this is, I'm fucked.

Kabanata 11

I couldn't sleep that day.

I haven't felt this way to anyone. Parang lalagnatin ako. I have nothing to do but to think about him. There's an unusual feeling about it.

I was too excited to go to school the other day. Halos hindi ako makatulog kagabi kakaisip ng susuotin ko. I planned my outfit in my head. I searched about new makeup routines, hair styles, and everything.

Sa huli, peach na knitted sweater ang suot ko sa taas ng puting uniform ko. I curled my hair a bit just to make a volume and did a cute Korean makeup that I saw somewhere in Pinterest.

"Wow, Winona. Mukha kang manika ah," my seatmate in my first class said. I smiled. I hope she wasn't waiting for a compliment, too.

Sa kabilang upuan ay usually iyong chubby na kaklase ko ang umuupo. She used to be earlier than me pero wala pa siya noong nakarating ako. I saw her enter five minutes after I arrived. Akala ko ay uupo siya sa tabi ko pero dumiretso siya sa likod.

Before I could turn my head at the back, Akiro arrived with Darleen. Akiro was wearing no hoodie today, just his white uniform. Pumuputok ang sleeves niya dahil sa laki ng biceps niya.

While Darleen was wearing an ugly white jacket that I don't really care about where she got it.

Sabay pa talaga pumasok?

"Uh, bakit nakaupo si Jillian sa seat mo?" Darleen asked. "Do you want to sit with me? Palilipatin ko nalang 'yong seatmate ko."

Akiro looked at me. Without a word, he placed his bag on the seat beside me. Humigpit ang hawak ko sa ballpen. I saw Darleen raise her eyebrow.

She smiled at me. "Oh, Winona? I didn't recognize you. I see you're trying something new, huh?"

Binaba ko ang ballpen ko. "Thanks, Darleen," sabi ko. "Would you like a tutorial? I would be glad to show you. Looks like you need it more than I do."

Humalukipkip siya. She didn't find anything to say to me, so she glanced at Akiro.

"So, Akiro, sabay tayo later sa lunch? Walang pasok sa next subject since aasikasuhin nalang daw natin thesis natin," she said.

Akiro pulled his seat closer to mine. Kinagat ko ang loob ng pisngi ko. Tumikhim ako at halos idikit ko na ang upuan ko sa kabilang katabi ko.

"Can't. I have plans with Winona," he said.

"What?" sabay kami ni Darleen.

"We have some things to finish with our thesis," he said.

As much as I wanted Darleen to die out of jealousy, I couldn't react the way I wanted to! It was killing me! Hindi pwede ito.

I pulled my lips into a cracked smile. "I'm sorry, Darleen. Obviously, this is not my choice to make."

Darleen laughed awkwardly and walked away. Noong makaalis siya ay doon pa lang ako binagsakan ng nerbyos. Inis kong nilingon si Akiro.

"Hindi ako makikipaglunch sayo," sabi ko. "I have plans."

"You heard me. We're doing our thesis."

Humalukipkip ako. "Bakit hindi mo tawagin iyong dalawang gunggong nating kagrupo?"

He clicked his jaw. "Well, you are the leader, aren't you?"

Tatamaan ito sa akin.

Tipid akong ngumiti. "Fine!"

He was still looking at me while I had already locked myself in preparing my notes for today's recitation.

"What were your plans, anyway?" he asked again..

Hindi ko na siya nilingon.

"I'm going on a date."

Ngumuso si Akiro. He massaged his chin. "Really? I even thought you dressed up for me."

Muntik ko na siyang itumba.

"I'm always pretty, Akiro. I never make an effort to be pretty. Especially not for you." Umikot ang mata ko.

"And who is this date you got, hmm?" bulong iyon. Bulong na halos mangiliti sa tenga ko.

Matalim ko siyang tinignan. "It's none of your business! It's not like I gave a damn when you and that smelly girl go out or something."

His eyes were amazed for something.

"Hindi kami nagde-date ni Darleen," he whispered. "I don't go out to date girls, Winona."

I made a face.

"But if I do, I'd like to take you out on a date."

Pumasok na ang professor namin bago pa man ako makapagreact. Pinagsisipa ko ang upuan ni Akiro palayo sa akin. I sense a weird eyes stabbing on my back, kay Darleen iyon. Lalo pa noong ilagay ni Akiro ang kamay niya sa sandalan ko.

I didn't remove it. Gusto kong mahimatay si Darleen sa likuran. Although, I also wanted to run from this man's grip. Nababaliw na siguro ako.

The professor announced a recitation. Nabalot ng reklamo ang paligid. The air was thick with that familiar nervous energy. The kind that made students suddenly read their notes like their lives depended on it. I smiled and looked at my notes on my iPad. Akiro was... well, Akiro. He just coldly nodded and didn't do anything.

Hindi ko nga alam kung nag-aaral siya. He only has his black notebook everywhere. He doesn't even write on it.

"Miss Santos," Professor called.

Darleen stood up smoothly, smiling plastered on her face. "Yes, sir?"

"Define and give a specific example of reaction formation as a defense mechanism."

I tilted her head. Of course, it's an easy one for her.

"Reaction formation," Darleen began confidently, "is when someone behaves in a way that's opposite to their actual feelings to hide or repress them. Like... a person who dislikes someone but acts overly nice to them."

Tumikhim ako. Her answer is correct, but it's way more than that. Her answer is too... what is the word? Relatable?

Darleen sat down, flipping her hair. She looked back at me for a split second, that little smirk crawling onto her lips again. Bitch.

"Ayasaki," sunod na tinawag ng professor matapos ang iilan.

Akiro lazily raised his hand and stood up.

"What defense mechanism involves transferring unacceptable impulses or feelings from the original source to a safer target?"

"That's displacement."

"Very good. What about intellectualization?"

Follow-up question?

He didn't miss a beat. "That's when someone avoids emotional stress by focusing on logic or facts instead of feelings."

"Excellent. And sublimation?"

"Channeling negative impulses into something socially acceptable," Akiro answered, almost too fast. "Like someone with aggressive tendencies joining boxing or martial arts."

Maraming namangha kay Akiro sa sunod sunod niyang pagsagot. I can not deny how good he is, actually. I heard he used to take Political Science pero nagshift lamang siya. I guess he is really smart.

Not smarter than me, though.

"Miss Lopez," tinawag na ako.

I stood up with grace and poise.

"Differentiate between Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD) in terms of ego-syntonic versus ego-dystonic behaviors."

A couple of students groaned softly. That was a heavy one. Thank goodness I was ready.

"OCD behaviors are ego-dystonic, ma'am," I replied smoothly. "Meaning the person knows their obsessions or compulsions are unreasonable but can't control them. While OCPD traits are ego-syntonic, they believe their orderliness and perfectionism are appropriate."

Professor nodded approvingly. "Good. Excellent start."

Isa pa?

"What's the clinical distinction between Bipolar I and Bipolar II Disorder in terms of mania?"

"Bipolar I involves at least one manic episode, which may require hospitalization or cause marked impairment. Bipolar II involves hypomanic episodes and major depressive episodes, but no full manic episode," sagot ko.

"Okay, last for Miss Lopez," the professor continued. "Explain the difference between somatic symptom disorder and illness anxiety disorder, and provide one diagnostic criteria for each based on DSM-5."

My mouth opened for an answer, but my brain stopped working. I remember I was reading that last night, but I skipped because I thought this would not be discussed!

"Somatic symptom disorder is when..." I started slowly, trying to recall. "When... uh... there's... physical symptoms, but..."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I bet Darleen's smirking like a dog.

The professor tilted her head. "Go on."

I hated it. I hated the feeling.

I answered everything. This shouldn't be hard. Come on, Win.

"Miss Lopez, you can ask for a hand if you want. You won't get a perfect score but you'll get half."

"No, sir. I can answer-"

"I'll answer," a voice behind me said.

Maya maya pa ay tumayo sa gilid ko si Akiro. My feet was frozen. Out of all people.

"Go ahead, Ayasaki."

"Somatic symptom disorder involves one or more actual physical symptoms that cause distress and disruption in daily life," he explained coolly, his deep voice steady. "Illness anxiety disorder is more about preoccupation with having or acquiring a serious illness without significant physical symptoms. For SSD, one of the criteria is excessive thoughts or behaviors related to the symptoms. For IAD, it's health anxiety for at least six months."

He explained it precisely. I didn't have nothing to say about it.

"Very good. Sit down, both of you."

Nagkatinginan kami. He borely stared at me. Nakaawang lamang ang bibig ko. Halos hindi ko na iyon maisara. I can't believe I failed to answer it.

Tulala ako sa buong klase. I couldn't even touch my iPad and take down notes. I felt like I failed a lot today.

Kinuha ko ang bag ko at tumayo nang matapos ang klase. I wanted to clear my head, maybe review or I don't know. I stopped when I saw Darleen and Akiro outside, talking. Iiwas na ako nang marinig ko ang pangalan ko.

"Winona!" Darleen called. "Ang lungkot mo naman. Don't worry, you were great kanina!" she grinned.

I turned around to face her. Ngumisi ako. "Oh, you did, too. Except the question for you was good enough for a seven year old to answer."

"Swerte mo lang dahil nasagot ni Akiro."

Akiro bore his eyes at me. "That's enough."

Why is he looking at me? Ako ba ang nagsimula?

Umikot ang mata ko. "Oh, right, Akiro. I won't be joining you today." sabi ko. "Looks like you have plans, anyway."

Tumalikod ako at hindi ko na hinintay ang sasabihin. Mabilis akong naglakad paalis. I cursed myself. I dressed up, I looked so pretty only to be laughed at!

Hindi pa ako nakakababa ng building nang gumaan ang dala kong bag. Next second, my bag was pulled from me. My mouth hanged and saw a tall Japanese looking man beside me.

"Akiro! I said-"

"Just walk."

"Ano ba kasi!" inis na sabi ko at huminto maglakad.

He stopped to look at me. He clenched his jaw. "If this is about what happened in the class, don't bother-"

"Nandoon 'yong babae mo! Doon ka sumama!"

He poked his inner cheek with his tongue. Nanunuyo ang mga mata niya at may guhit ng ngiti sa labi niya.

"Baby, I'm not confused. Nandito ang babae ko..."

Kabanata 12

If somebody told me a year ago that I would be in a lunch date with a hot Japanese guy, I would've been so excited. Pero ngayon, hindi ako makaramdam ng ganoon.

Inis. Pikon.

Iyon ang nararamdaman ko.

"What do you think?" Akiro said while showing me his works.

I sighed. Luminga linga ako sa cafeteria kung saan niya ako dinala. There were people, mostly students. May mga nakatingin sa lamesa namin. Akiro is friendly, I realized that just now when I counted how many people smiled and nodded at him.

Nanliit ang paningin ko. "That's it?"

He nodded casually at me.

Humalukipkip ako at tumingin sa kaniya. "You should've just sent this file to me. Bakit gusto mo pa akong dalhin dito? Is this supposed a date, Akiro?"

Tumaas ang kilay niya. "If I wanted to date you, I could've just said so."

Umikot ang mata ko. Oh, yeah?

"Hindi ako makikipagdate sayo kahit yayain mo ako."

"Then, we'll meet for our thesis again tomorrow. Same time?" he whispered softly and stared at my reaction.

Umawang ang labi ko. This is unbelievable.

"You wish," bulong ko pabalik sa kaniya.

"I'll see you in your training."

Halos hampasin ko ang lamesa. I smirked unbelievably.

"Hindi ko na itutuloy!"

His lips moved into a smirk. "You wish."

I can't believe this guy. Parang araw araw niya pinaglalaruan ang metro ng dugo ko. Palaging kumukulo.

Shannon laughed when I told her the story and how I felt. Kumunot ang noo ko at na-offend sa tawa niya.

"Well, okay, you're pretty. You're hot, bla bla bla..." she laughed and rolled her eyes. "Remember why you wanted to be his friend in the first place?"

"Yes but I'm not doing that anymore, Shannon. I told you, I can't handle that man. Hahanap na lang ako ng kaibigan kong daga!"

"Maybe he's planning the same thing to you," she said. "His father and Tito are still competing with each other. Maybe, hindi mo tinuloy iyong plano mo pero siya..."

I was quiet for a moment. Nanliit ang paningin ko habang nakatingin sa salamin ng sasakyan ko.

I raised my eyebrow. "Wala siyang makukuha sa akin."

"Who knows?" Shannon shrugged on the screen. "He's been in your house. Where more would you let him in?"

"That's different. Thesis 'yon."

"You're obviously dressing up for him, too!" bulalas niya.

Namilog ang mata ko. "What? Ew! No! I'm trying a different style, I told you!"

"Talaga? You didn't care what your make up looks like when you're dating Rex." she laughed. "Maybe because he's Japanese that's why your eyeliner looks like that!"

"Stop it, Shan!" sabi ko, napupuno na. "I'm not dressing up for a man. Hindi ko siya crush! At kung oo, ano ako? Highschool? Maganda ako, I don't need to impress anyone."

I barely had crushes. Most of the time, ako ang crush. Nagcru-crush back lang ako.

I've been thinking about what Shannon said about Akiro's motive. Maybe I was stupid to not think of it. If I was thinking otherwise, I would've thought he was crushing on me even though Akiro's not really the type to do crushes. Hindi ko nga alam kung nakakaramdam iyon ng emosyon.

Maaga akong pumunta ulit sa gym para sa schedule ko. I wore a pair of skirt and Nike black shirt top.

He is playing my game, I thought bitterly. Well, that sucks because I wouldn't let him win. I wouldn't fall for his lies.

Akiro Ayasaki, in a black sleeveless top, muscles flexing every time he adjusted his gloves, veins showing just enough to ruin a girl’s peace.

I swallowed the bitterness inside of me. Lumalim ang inis ko. If he's really doing this just to get back at me, well, he's making a mistake. I'm no fool. Mauuto niya si Darleen pero ako, hindi.

I saw Allen talking to some girls, too. Nang makita ako'y iniwan niya ang mga iyon at malawak ang ngiti na sinalubong ako. Kasama niya ay isang lalaki din na pamilyar dahil nakikita kong nagco-coach din ito dito.

I watched Akiro's chinito eyes drawn at us now.

"Aga mo ah!" Allen said. "Pinapahirapan ka ba ng coach mo?"

Ngumuso ako. "Hindi naman. I just thought there would be traffic, you know..."

"Ah," tumawa siya. "Coach Kevin, si Winona pala..."

Ngumiti sa akin ang coach. He has a great form. I smiled at him, too.

Nilingon ko si Akiro. Pabagsak niyang binaba ang tuwalya niya sa katabing couch. Kumulubot ang ulo niya at galit na naglalakad patungo sa amin.

"May coach na siya?" Coach Kevin asked. "Libre naman ako. I can assist you on your warm-up while Kiro's fixing some weights if you want."

Akiro had a great timing. He stood beside me while the two men were infrong of us. Nakita ko ang mapaglarong ngisi sa labi ni Allen.

"Problema?" tanong ni Akiro.

Allen laughed. "Assist lang daw ni Coach Kevs si Win. Doon ka muna. 'Diba busy ka pa?"

Akiro raised his eyebrow at Kevin. "Ako na. Akin 'to."

Coach Kevin looked confused.

"Tapos na ba 'yong weights? Ayos lang naman kung asikasuhin ko muna si miss."

Akiro clicked his jaw. "I said, she's with me."

Humagalpak ang tawa ni Allen. "Oo nga, pre! Warm-up lang naman! Sayo pa din pagkatapos."

Matalim na tinignan ni Akiro ang kaibigan. "I said no." Then he looked at me. "Proceed to warm-up."

I looked at him unbelievably. The effort he's putting in for this act is believable, honestly. Umikot ang mata ko.

We started with warm-up. I followed him to the squat rack, pretending I wasn’t staring at how his shoulders moved under that stupid black top.

We started with lunges, then squats, his hand occasionally hovering near my back to correct my form but never quite touching. Always that safe distance. Always that control.

Ngumisi ako.

"Straighten your back," he whispered. "Don't bend here."

Nangilabot ako sa pagdulas ng kamay niya sa likod ko hanggang sa balakang. I bit the inner of my cheek.

"Coach Kiro, hindi ka ganyan sa ibang training mo ah!" Allen laughed. "Hindi ka na makalunok!"

I swallowed hard.

"I can't believe you refused that coach to help me warm-up," sabi ko. "I'm obviously too early and you were busy."

"A job is a job," Akiro said. "You're my client. I will obviously put you first even if you arrived early."

Umirap ako. "That coach seemed fun."

Akiro stopped for a while. Tumuwid ako ng tayo at tinignan ko siya. He was eyeing me with his dark stare.

"You're here to work out, Winona. Not to have fun."

Pumaymewang ako. "Oo nga! Well, you're so grim and cold. I need a good laugh, too, Akiro."

Humalukipkip siya at lumapit sa akin. His face went near to mine. Kumunot ang noo ko at umatras.

"Thirty second planks for you."

"What!"

He walked back. "Now."

This fucking...

Pagkatapos ng parusa ko, we started with some leg sets. The leg press machine wasn't built for dignity. Matalim kong tinignan si Akiro habang nakayuko at ina-adjust ang machine para sa akin.

"So, how much are we pushing today? Are you trying to slowly kill me?" I said with a sarcastic smile.

"Feet shoulder-width apart," he said, crouching beside the machine to adjust the weight. Hindi man lang pinansin ang sinabi ko.

I gritted my teeth. I started pushing the weight with my feet. I bit my lips as my feet felt the heaviness. Matalim kong tinignan si Akiro nang makaramdam ng ngawit at pagod na para bang siya ang dahilan ng paghihirap ko.

He leaned closer, bracing one hand on the side of the machine, his other hand adjusting my knee position. His fingers grazed my skin, just enough to send a current through me, but his eyes didn't waver.

"Don't lock your legs," he said, voice lower this time. "Slow and controlled. Feel the tension."

Ginawa ko iyon. I groaned. Nakita ko siyang nakatingin sa hita ko.

I paused. "I can report you for staring."

His brows furrowed. "I'm checking your form."

"Uh-huh. Is that what we're calling it now?"

Umigting ang panga niya. He leaned closer to my ear. "You had no problem with Allen checking you out."

I raised my eyebrow. Finally, I pulled the lever to stop the weight from pushing me down. Matalim ko siyang tinignan.

"He wasn't checking me out."

He smirked without humor. "You don't know him like I do."

"Well, I don't care. I actually like him."

He poked his inner cheek and bit his lips. "Why did you reject him, then..."

Lumunok ako. Bumubulong siya sa tenga ko. His voice was low and raspy. I could smell his fresh mint breath and manly perfume near my nose. Tumindig ang balahibo ko.

I pushed the weight slowly. "I didn't want a boyfriend back then but I do now."

Really, Winona.

"Uh-hmm?" bulong niya. "I'll be your boyfriend, then."

Namilog ang mata ko.

Nilingon ko siya. He wasn't even smirking or anything. He was dead serious. My mouth hanged and I almost dropped the weight on me, he was just assisting my knees. If not, kanina pa ako dinaganan!

"I didn't really ask for your volunteer on that, Akiro."

He licked his lips. "Liligawan kita, kung ganoon."

"Basted ka na," iritado na sabi ko.

His lips formed into a small smirk. He pushed himself away from the machine.

"Thirty squats after that," he commanded. "Make it fast."

My mouth hanged. I can't believe this! He is killing me!

Kabanata 13

With the thesis starting, I thought I would be busy about it but I was wrong. I am one step ahead of every chapter but Akiro is three steps ahead. I read the chapter he wrote. Perfect paragraphs, reliable sources and informations. It's like I don't even need to check anything.

I sighed.

Edward: Ay, tapos mo na, Kiro? Gagawin ko sana 'yong part ko pero sige, hindi na...

Mico: Hina wifi namin @Winona, buti nagawa na ni boss Akiro. Hehe.

Umikot ang mata ko.

Me: I'll still check it. Hindi pa naman 'yan final.

Edward: Okay na 'yan! Hehehe. Baka mas mali pa 'yong gawa namin.

Me: Fine.

Me: I'll send my part.

Akiro: I already did yours.

Akiro: Sent a file.

Tumaas ang kilay ko. Sumandal ako sa inuupuan. Kalahating oras kong ginagawa iyong parte ko sa Starbucks, tapos gagawin lang niya?

Me: Bakit mo ginawa 'yong akin?

Akiro: I didn't know it was your part.

Me: This is a group thesis. Kung gusto mo gumawa ng sarili mong thesis, mag-solo ka. You can't expect us to just put your name in the book!

Nakakainis!

I get that he's smart, fine! But this is just irritating enough. Pakiramdam ko, tinatapakan niya ang ego ko. I can do that too but I won't because I'm not pabida. He is pabida!

Edward: Bumingo ka, pre. 'Yong sakin nalang gawin mo palagi. Hehe joke.

I turned off my phone and focused on my laptop, instead. I downloaded the file he sent even if I was so damn pissed. The title of the file was my part. He was neat with that. Ofcourse, I read every paragraph and lines between.

Huminto ako nang umabot ako sa dulo. Kumunot ang noo ko.

Statement of Intent, it says. Statement of what? This is not a part of our goddamn research. What the heck?

Statement of Intent

Throughout the progress of this research, one consistent pattern has become clear. Some things are worth pursuing beyond the scope of the study.

In this case, the subject of interest has shown traits that make further involvement not just ideal, but necessary. Based on observation and personal evaluation, the researcher concludes that he genuinely wants to take this connection to the next phase, officially.

Simply put, this isn't part of the thesis anymore.
It's a proposal. I want to be your boyfriend.

My mouth hanged.

Napasandal ako.

Is he serious? He really sent this to our research group chat! I doubt that the two dumbass would even open the file but the audacity of this sick bastard! How dare he propose to me like this!

And to expect me to accept it? Ang kapal ng mukha.

I opened my phone and went to our group chat.

Me: @Akiro Ayasaki, rejected.

Umirap ako.

Tinitigan ko ang nakabukas na file sa harapan ko. Maybe what Shannon said was true. Is he really doing this just go get to me for my father? What does he want? Information? Something that would make my father lose the election?

Nasa kalagitnaan ako ng pag-iisip nang mahagip ng tingin ko ang kaibigan ni Akiro papasok sa Starbucks. He obviously saw me first. I turned off my laptop before he could sight whatever I was reading.

"Winona!" Allen said. "Grabe, long time no see."

I scoffed. "You're funny."

"Ayos lang ba?" he gestured the seat. "Haba pa ng pila, eh. Upo muna ako."

I nodded and grabbed my bag from the seat beside me. Ever since I moved from Manila, I never really had a permanent friend here. Only annoying people. Allen doesn't even go to my school but I think of him as a friend.

"You have pasok," I said while looking at his uniform.

He smirked. "Nagcutting ako. Ikaw din?"

I shook my head. "I'm just doing some thesis thing."

"Talaga?" he seemed interested. "Classmates kayo ni hapon, 'diba?"

"Groupmates din."

Lumawak ang ngisi niya. "Kaya pala ganado mag-aral si gago."

"Huh?" kumunot ang noo ko.

Allen laughed. "Wala. Sabihin mo nalang sa kaniya goodluck sa data gathering. Or whatever it is he's gathering." humagalpak siya ng tawa.

Hindi ako nagsalita. I don't exactly know what he means. Ayaw ko din alamin.

"Close na kayo? I mean, I know both of your father is running for mayor."

I scoffed. "I don't like him regardless of that."

Humagalpak siya ng tawa na may kasamang palakpak. "Damn, girl. I like you!"

Umikot ang mata ko at natawa. I realized that Akiro and Allen actually has a opposite personality yet they are considered friends which is questionable.

"Tang ina, ingay ng gc..." si Allen at hinugot ang cellphone. He scrolled down. I sipped on my drink and tried to focus more on my paper.

"Busy ka mamaya?" Allen smiled at me.

I licked my lips. "No. Not really."

"Ayos!" he grinned. "You like parties, right? Birthday ng tropa ko. Don't worry, kasama na sila Dheia. You remember them?"

Humalukipkip ako at pinanliitan ng mata si Allen. I shrugged. "Sure. Is Akiro gonna be there?"

"Hindi siya invited."

I smiled widely.

Party reminds me of Manila a lot. Crazy nights in Xylo with Shannon and Rex. I would pass out in the middle of the night and Shan would take me home. I like drinking but in all honesty, drinking is only good when you're in a great company.

Allen insisted to fetch me but I refused. Gagamitin ko ang sasakyan ko. I wore a maong skirt and a bandana top with my leather jacket on. Mapula ang labi ko at hinayaan kong nakalugay lamang ang buhok ko.

The party was located in a tight private village in Camp John Hay. Allen said it was a birthday party so I bought a wine as a gift.

Allen : Nakita ko na Jimny mo. Sunduin kita, wait lang. :)

Earlier, we exchanged numbers. Ngumisi ako.

Nakasandal ako sa sasakyan ko namg makita ko si Allen na lumabas sa malaking bahay. The noise was

obviously inside. I even saw some cars parked outside like mine. Hindi gaanong marami pero mayroon.

Pumaswit si Allen sa akin.

I rolled my eyes. "You didn't have to fetch me outside, Allen."

"Baka maligaw ka, eh..." kumamot siya sa batok. "Well, you look like you're about to break hearts tonight. Including mine. Pero okay lang, sanay na."

I pushed myself away from my car and started walking.

"Who's birthday it is, anyway?"

Tumawa siya ng hilaw. "Secret muna. Baka umalis ka, eh..."

Kumunot ang noo ko. I looked at him with a warning. "Allen..."

He laughed. "Chill, woman! Tropa ko nga."

Umikot ang mata ko. Binigay ko ang alak na dala ko. "My gift to whoever it is."

"Yown!" he laughed.

"Where's your gift?" I asked.

"Heto," sabi niya at inakbayan ako.

The house was a literal mansion. I could see the heavy security in front. Nakaparada ang iilang sports car sa garahe. The party was being held at the back. I guessed that it already started because I saw some drunk people scattered around.

Pumasok kami at dumiretso sa likod. Maingay ang party sa likod. A wide backyard and a pool. Some people were busy chatting, trying to get a grip with each other, greeting people. Ngumiwi ako.

"Pre, bago na naman 'yan ah..." rinig ko sa likod.

"Gago, hindi akin 'to!" si Allen.

Matalim kong tinignan iyon. Humigpit ang hawak niya sa balikat ko nang makarating kami sa malawak na mesa. My eyes lingered on the people sitting on it. May mga towers ng alak at pagkain.

"Happy birthday, Akiro!" Allen shouted.

My mouth hanged.

With that, I saw Akiro standing on the corner with his friends. Nilapag niya ang basong hawak niya at tinignan ako ng masama. His eyes were on the arm on my shoulder. He looked at it like he was cutting the arm off.

Siniko ko si Allen. "You didn't tell me it was his birthday!"

Bumaling ang ulo niya sa tenga ko. "Kung sinabi ko, sasama ka ba?"

Matalim ko siyang tinignan. "Obviously not!"

"Relax ka lang. Hindi naman required batiin mo."

"You're insane!"

My eyes darted on Darleen with her friends. They were in the same table as Allen's friends. Nakita ko na ang dalawang babaeng kaibigan ni Allen na kumakaway sa akin.

"Winona!" Dheia called. "Here!"

Iniwan ko si Allen at tumungo sa kaniyang mga babaeng kaibigan. Nasa dulo ng lamesa sila Darleen na nakakunot ang noo sa akin. Ang iba ay hindi ko na kilala. Nakapako pa din ang tingin ni Akiro na ngayon ay bumalik sa upuan niya.

Jackie smiled at me. "I didn't know you were coming. Magkaklase nga pala kayo ni Kiro."

Ngumiti ako. I wasn't even invited. I am gatecrashing this party! I can't believe he proposed to be my boyfriend yet he didn't even invite me to his party?

"You know them? Kaklase din sila ni Kiro," turo ni Dheia kila Darleen sa dulo.

Umiling ako. "We're not really that close."

"Ah, talaga? It must be hard to adjust. May mga kaibigan ka na ba dito?"

"I know Allen," I shrugged. "Nagkikita kami sa gym madalas."

Umikot ang mata ni Jackie. "Pick someone else. Not Allen. I swear."

"Why don't I get your Instagram? We can hang-out sometimes." Dheia smiled. "What are your hobbies?"

Jackie smirked. "Inuman kasi hobby namin."

"I like café hunting."

"I like coffee!" Dheia seemed excited. "Well, madalas kami nag-iinuman. If you're up for that, you can join us. I will message you."

"Why not?" ngumisi ako.

We chatted for enough while drinking. Jackie had a lot to drink so she was quite loud. She was telling stories that I couldn't understand. I just laughed because of the way she started pronouncing words.

"Happy birthday again, Akiro!" I heard Darleen said and approached him. "I have a gift for you but it's in the car. Do you mind helping me?"

Akiro nodded slightly. Tinapik siya ng mga kaibigan at hinayaang umalis. Nanatili ang mga mata ko kay Darleen at Akiro na paalis sa pool area. I almost broke my neck trying to get hold of them.

"Ilang minutes kaya sila?" humagalpak ang tawa ng isang kaibigan ni Akiro. Riley was his name, I was sure.

"Oras siguro," someone laughed. "Ganoon katagal."

Humagalpak ang tawa ni Allen. Matalim ko siyang tinignan. His laugh was drowned.

"Parang may ribbon pa sa leeg 'nung babae. Baka siya talaga 'yong regalo!" Jackie laughed. I shifted on my seat uncomfortably.

Riley laughed. "Baka kapag bumalik, pawis na."

"H'wag mong igaya sayo, Riley," Dheia rolled her eyes.

"Birthday sex! Birthday sex!" Riley started singing. Allen started clapping.

I stood up. Umubo si Allen at nanginginig ang balikat na pinagmasdan ako. I cleared my throat and excused myself to go to the comfort room. Hindi ko alam kung saan pero pumasok lamang ako sa loob ng bahay. Bukas naman iyon at may mga taong pumapasok. I saw the comfort room near the kitchen bar stool.

I don't know what I was feeling. I felt sick. I want to leave or smack Allen's face. This is all his fault!

I went out of the comfort room after almost fifteen minutes. I gripped my clutch tight and went to find water. I grabbed a glass and chugged it, thinking that maybe I'm just thirsty. Baka guni-guni ko lang ang nararamdaman ko.

I stopped when I saw a figure coming close to me. I almost choked the water. Umubo ako at matalim na tinignan si Akiro na palapit sa akin.

His lips was in grim line and his eyes darted on me like I did a sin or something.

I walked and was about to leave when he held my arm. He pinned me in the barstool. Nakasandal ako sa barstool habang nasa harapan ko siya. He looked down on me with a bit of annoyance in his eyes.

"What?" iritado kong sabi. "Aalis na ako. This was a mistake. Allen took me here and I didn't know it was your birthday."

He clicked his jaw and placed both of his hands on the sides of my waist. Umatras para makayuko ng maayos.

Mapungay ang mga mata niya. He smelled like a mixture of whiskey and wood perfume. His plain white t-shirt didn't look plain on him.

"You haven't greeted me yet," he whispered.

"What?"

"My birthday," he said.

"You didn't even invite me!" iritadong sabi ko. Like I even wanted to be invited. No, thank you.

He licked his lips. "They surprised me with this party. I didn't know."

Humalukipkip ako. "There's no point in greeting, anyway. Binati ka na ng lahat. Maybe Darleen even give

you her 'birthday gift'." I quoted in the air.

Umangat ng kaunti ang kilay niya. "Yeah. She gave me a box of whiskey..."

Umikot ang mata ko. "I wonder what else she gave you to take you all the way to her car."

Was I giving it away on that?

His eyebrows shut up. Namungay ang mga mata niya sa akin.

"First, you rejected me. Now, you're jealous?"

"Hindi ako nagseselos, kapal ng mukha mo."

"Ano ang tawag mo d'yan?"

Hinampas ko ang dibdib niya. "I said I'm not jealous, Akiro. We're not together. Binasted na kita!"

He licked his lips and raised his eyebrow. "Why? You like Allen?"

I gritted my teeth. "What are you talking about?"

"Is that why you rejected me, hmm?" bulong niya.

His face was almost near me. Umatras ako na para bang magkakaroon ako ng allergic reaction kapag mas lumapit pa siya sa akin.

I swallowed hard. "If I did, what are you gonna do about it?" my voice rejected me.

"Susuntukin ko," he breathed.

I closed my eyes when his face was almost an inch closer to me. Kinuyom ko ang kamay ko sa gilid ng miniskirt ko. I could feel his hot breath on my nose.

It was three second but his lips never brushed mine. Dumilat ako. I can still see his lips. It was parted. It was thirsty.

"Tell me to stop."

I swallowed hard. So hard that no voice came out. I couldn't move.

Gumuhit ang maliit na ngiti sa labi niya. His hand found the side of my neck, his thumb brushing my jaw as he kissed me, slow but sure, like he knew I'd been waiting for it even before I did.

He pulled away. Before I could react, I immediately heard noises behind us. Clapping, teasing, laughing...

"Putang ina mo, Kiro!" someone laughed.

"Hindi pala cake ang nais kainin!" I heard Riley laugh. "Lupit mo, pre!"

Allen walked to the kitchen, furious. "Bro, I wanted her to greet you. Hindi ko sinabing kainin mo ang

mukha!"

My eyes widened as I looked at the open glass wall. My jaw dropped as I pushed Akiro away from me who was chuckling. He bit his lips and looked at me, amused.

"You're all idiots," Akiro cursed and looked at me. "I like this gift better..."

My face was heating as I grabbed my clutch and run away.

Kabanata 14

I tried erasing the memory of kissing Akiro in my head but I stop and see myself pinching my lips together. I have only kissed Rex noong boyfriend ko siya. I would never kiss anyone unless they were my boyfriend!

That was not me. That wasn't me at all!

I didn't know how to face anyone after that party. Wala naman akong choice dahil may klase ako. The worst part is that he's my classmate.

I entered our classroom and found Darleen on my seat. Humalukipkip siya at pabagsak na nilagay ang upuang sira sa pwesto ko. She really waited for me to arrive.

"This seat was broken. They used this room last weekend for a meeting kasi," she smiled. "Looks like it was yours."

Tumaas ang kilay ko. Hindi na niya ako hinintay na magsalita. She left me with the broken chair. Iritado kong tinitigan ang upuan at iniisip kung paano ako makakapagsulat doon.

I am pretty sure she's doing this on purpose! That witch!

Uminit ang tenga ko nang makita ko si Akiro na papasok sa classroom. Nagkatinginan kami. He saw how I couldn't even put my bag down to my chair. Hindi na ako nagdalawang-isip na ilapag ang bag ko doon.

I heard Akiro tsk-ed. Malamig ang tingin niya sa akin at kinuha ang bag ko. Umatras ako.

"What the heck?"

Tumalikod siya habang hila hila ang bag ko. Pinanood ko siyang ilagay iyon sa likod, sa tabi ng upuan niya. I saw how Darleen reacted on it. Umikot ang mata niya at matalim akong tinignan. Like it was my fault she broke my chair!

I angrily walked to Akiro. "Doon ang upuan ko."

"You can take Simon's chair. Hindi siya papasok," sabi niya.

"I don't want to seat here."

"It's either on this chair or in my lap, Winona. Choose wisely."

Kumunot ang noo ko. "You're unbelievable!"

I was going to fight him until the professor entered our classroom. Hindi nako nakapagsalita. Naupo na lamang ako.

Akiro watched me closely as I neatly placed my things on my chair. I tried my best to focus most on our lectures because there will be a quiz after. Hindi ko lang alam sa katabi ko dahil buong magdamag, wala sa whiteboard ang mata niya kung hindi nasa akin.

I gritted my teeth. "Eyes on the goddamn board, Ayasaki."

"Right," he murmured and chuckled a bit.

Maya maya pa ay naramdaman ko ang kamay niya na gumagapang sa sandalan ng upuan ko. His feet are wide apart. He seats like he's in a goddamn throne.

"Bring out a piece of yellow paper," the professor said.

I opened my folded yellow paper. Sa gilid ng mata ko at nakita ko ang pagtayo ni Darleen. She handed a piece of yellow paper to Akiro.

"Thanks but I already have one," Akiro said and grabbed my yellow paper.

My mouth hanged. Kumunot ang noo ni Darleen at napilitang ngumiti. She glared at me as she turned her back. Kahit nakatalikod, ramdam ko pa din ang pananaksak ng tingin niya sa akin!

Pumilas si Akiro ng isang papel ko at binalik sa akin ang natira.

"Don't tell me, wala ka din ballpen?" iritado kong sabi.

He took out a G-tech pen from his bag. Iyon lang yata ang laman ng bag niya! Umikot ang mata ko.

The quiz started. It's a twenty item quiz. Ang unang sampu ay walang pawis kong nasagutan. Halfway, I peeked at Akiro and saw that he was answering every question like a slambook.

Blangko na ako paglagpas ng sampu. I cursed under my breath. Some questions were hard. Iilan lamang ang yumuyuko para sumagot, ang iba ay nanatiling nag-iisip at isa ako doon.

"Cognitive distortion," he murmured.

"What?"

He bit his lips. "Number sixteen."

Kumurap kurap ako. "Are you cheating?"

"Just helping."

Umirap ako. "Alam ko 'yong sagot."

No, I didn't.

His lips formed into a smirk. "Bakit hindi mo isulat?"

"Kasi iniisip ko pa kung tama!"

Tumikhim ang professor sa harapan. "You, two at the back. Eyes on your paper!"

Sumiksik ako sa kabilang gilid. Mabilis kong sinulat iyong sagot na sinabi niya. The next questions was like a blur. I couldn't answer two numbers. Na-blangko ako. For some reason, I couldn't remember. All I think about is Akiro. Just his irritating face!

"Exchange papers to your seatmate."

Napasandal ako. Matalim kong tinignan si Akiro at nakipagpalitan ng papel sa kaniya. I turned my back at him. Baka pati ang pag-check ko ay makalimutan ko na.

His name was written in Japanese as usual and his handwriting was neat and manly. He has answers in all of the numbers. For someone who was watching me the whole class, I can't believe he still had answers than me.

I checked everything. Perfect score ang nakuha niya. Ibabalik ko na sana pero hindi iyon pinahintulutan. We had to keep the papers and recite their scores.

"Ayasaki," napantig ang tenga ko nang tawagin.

Tumikhim ako. "Twenty."

Humalukipkip ako at nilingon si Akiro na prenteng nakaupo. Diretso ang tingin sa board habang nasa kamay ang papel ko.

"Lopez," the prof called my name.

Akiro handed me my paper as he said my score, "Twenty."

My eyes widened.

Shocked, I looked at my paper. I was sure I didn't write anything on two numbers. Kumunot ang noo ko nang makitang may nakasulat doon na sagot. At sulat kamay ni Akiro iyon.

I gritted my teeth. "You're a cheater," I said.

He shrugged. "I like when our score matches."

"Ewan ko sayo!"

Pagkatapos ng klase, kaagad akong dumiretso sa Dean's office para magrequest ng matinong upuan. I would never want to seat beside that monkey again.

I know that technically, I did not cheat on that two points I gained on that quiz. Gayumpaman, pumunta pa din ako sa simbahan para ipagdasal ang kasalanan ko na iyon. I also prayed that God would lead Akiro away from me.

@dheia_aurica: Hi, Win! We're going to Amper tonight. I'm with Jackie and some other friends.

Ngumiwi ako.

@jeanwinona: Hello, Dheia. Thanks for the invite but I have quiz tomorrow. Let's hang out some other time, though :)

Liar. I know how tight they hang-out with Akiro. Mas gugustuhin kong magmukmok na lamang sa kwarto kaysa magtagpo kami. I'm suffering enough in school and gym.

@dheia_aurica: No worries! Let's meet some other time. :)

I scrolled for a while on Instagram. I saw that Dheia posted a story just now. Pinindot ko iyon ng walang pag-aalinlangan. It was a video with flash. Nasa bar nga sila, madilim, pa-iba iba ang ilaw at maingay.

It was a quick video but I saw who she was with. In their table, there was Jackie, Allen, Riley, some of his friends, Akiro and... well, Darleen.

Uminit ang tenga ko.

@jeanwinona: Hi! I finished reviewing. Hope you don't mind if I stopped by.

@dheia_aurica: OMG. Sure, see you!

I sighed.

I wore a low waisted maong skirt and a crocheted white halter top. I curled my hair into a blowout and did a light makeup. Hindi na ako nagtagal pa sa pag-aayos. I grabbed my keys and drove my car.

What I felt was confusing. I was in a rush like I'm running late or something. I feel angry, pissed for some reason. I didn't like it. I didn't like that Darleen was there.

Bakit? Akala ko ba gusto niya maging boyfriend ko? Is he doing this just to piss me off? He kissed me and he goes out with other girl. To what, embarass me? My ego is being stepped on.

I arrived at the filthy bar after ten minutes of driving. Pinasok ko kaagad ang loob. I didn't even know where they were but I immediately sight them. Ang pinaka-maingay na couch.

I immediately saw Allen dancing with Akiro. Kaagad akong nakita ni Dheia na pilit umaawat sa kanila dahil nagiging bastos na iyon.

"Gosh, hi, Winona! I'm sorry you had to see that," she said. "Dito ka!"

Akiro saw me immediately. Hinanap ko kung nasaan si Darleen pero hindi ko siya mahanap. Imposibleng guni guni ko lang iyon!

Akiro licked his lips. "Dito siya, Dheia."

Dheia smiled. "Fine."

Iginiya niya ako sa tabi ni Akiro. I immediately regretted my decision. Naramdaman ko kaagad ang akbay niya sa upuan ko.

His friends immediately started teasing.

"Ganiyan ka pala, Coach Kiro!" Allen laughed his ass off. Matalim ko siyang tinignan.

Riley smirked. "Pumaldo si hapon!"

Humarap ako sa kaniya. He was smirking at his friends and hiding his laugh. He bit his lips when I looked at him. Namumungay na ang mga mata niya. He is drunk.

"Where is she?" I asked.

He tilted his head. "Who, baby?"

"Well, I saw Darleen here," I said. "Are you trying to embarass me? You kissed me at your party and everyone saw it. And now, you're with her! What will they think of me? Chicks mo?"

Umawang ang labi niya. He laughed. Tumingala siya habang tumatawa. Kumurap kurap ako. I pulled his shirt, like trying to make him understand what I said.

He held my hand and looked at me in the eye. "Darleen was with her friends. They saw me and greeted me. Hindi siya nagtagal dito."

"That's not my point," I said. "I am a conservative woman, Akiro. No one kisses me like that and just go out flirting other girls after!"

He was busy being amused with my reaction. "Ganda mo talaga magalit..."

"Akiro!" galit na sigaw ko.

"LQ!" Jackie shouted. "Bilis naman!"

I sighed. Akiro poked his inner cheek. He tsk-ed at his friend who was laughing at us.

He pulled himself closer to me to whisper. "I'm not flirting anyone, Winona. I don't really flirt. I also don't just kiss girls. I'm pretty conservative, too, you know."

Matalim ko siyang tinignan. "You stole a kiss from me, Akiro."

"I didn't steal it."

"Ano tawag mo doon?"

"Something I've been wanted to do for a while."

I almost choked from my own saliva.

"Baliw ka ba?" nauutal kong sabi.

He licked his lips. "I know you’re mad about it. You have every reason to be. But I don’t regret it. I'd do it again right now..."

Nagtitigan kami.

My heart was pounding strongly. My eyes went down to his lips. Nakaawang iyon. It was like I was thirsty and the only thing I could drink is from his lips.

I bit my tongue.

I knew it was a trap and yet I didn't dare to step back.

Kabanata 15

"You know what, I'm very curious how you liked Kiro given both of your father are competing with each other," Jackie started.

Akiro has been all over me. I couldn't move. Wala na sa mga kaibigan niya ang atensyon niya kung hindi ay nasa akin na. Hindi ko alam kung paano makakakilos ng maayos.

Kanina ko pa gustong umalis pero hindi ako maka-tyempo. It will be rude to Dheia who I agreed on meeting.

"Jackie!" Dheia seemed concerned. "Tatay nila iyon. Hindi naman sila ang magkalaban."

"Curious nga lang 'di ba," Jackie said.

Ngumiti ako. "I don't really involve myself on my father's business. I keep it separate. Besides, Akiro and I are only... friends."

Allen laughed. Ang tawa niya'y may ibig sabihin. Nilingon ko siya at bahagyang tinaasan ng kilay.

Akiro shifted on his seat uncomfortably. I felt how he pulled a sigh. Sa gilid ng mata ko ay nakatingin siya sa akin, hinihintay na tignan ko din siya pero hindi ko ginagalaw ang ulo ko.

"Rinig mo, hapon? Friends lang daw kayo! Capital F!"

Umikot ang mata ko. Akiro raised his eyebrow to his friend, a bit offended.

Riley laughed. "Tatadyakan ka n'yan, gago."

"Stop making Winona uncomfortable, ano ba kayo..." Dheia said and rolled her eyes. "I can't blame you if you don't want to hang-out next time."

Umiling ako. "It's okay."

"So, paano pala iyon kapag nangampanya kayo ni Akiro? Team blue siya tapos team yellow ka," si Allen. "Kanino tayo kakampi?"

"Depende kung magkano bigayan," Riley laughed. "Joke!"

"Gago ka talaga, Riley."

Ngumisi ako. "Your vote is to whoever you decide to be worthy, I guess."

Akiro clenched his jaw.

"Platform matters for me pa din," Dheia said. "I mean, no pressure ha."

"Botante ka ba, Allen, at kung makapagtanong ka d'yan?"

"Excuse me, Jacqueline?"

Riley scoffed. "Hindi nga 'yan tuli, botante pa kaya?"

"Fuck you, man," Allen chuckled. "Ayain ko si Primo dito, tignan ko kung sinong magwawalk-out."

"E'di siya, gago."

Jackie and Dheia was pretty hyped up from the music. Hinila nila ako papunta sa dance floor. Kunot ang noo ni Akiro habang pinapanood akong hilain ng mga kaibigan niya.

Jackie rolled her eyes. "Tang ina neto, hihiramin lang!"

Akiro nodded a bit. "Mawala 'yan..."

I always wondered how his friendship with girls seemed so comfortable. I mean, I actually never met anyone who had girl friends that are actually friends. Their friendship feels comfortable and genuin that I don't even feel any tensions.

Dheia jumped while hugging my arm. She's an inch taller than me. Mas maputi din siya sa akin. She's very pure, her appearance and attitude. While Jackie is quite a boyish. She has this strong aura that sometimes makes her look unapproachable.

We laughed together. I watched how Jackie recklessly danced her butt away. Pumalakpak ako.

"I'm happy you're enjoying tonight!" Dheia shouted because the music was drowning us.

I nodded. "I am. I'm happy we're doing this!"

She pouted. "Me too! Well, if you arrived a bit earlier, you could've met Blair and Quinn!"

"Your friends?"

"Yes. Blair left to study abroad last year. And Quinn left to focus on her career, she's a model. She was just here in January! Sayang, you could've met her."

Ngumiti ako. "She seems fun, too..."

"Oo," tumawa siya. "Didn't you just transfer in February? Hindi ba iyon mahirap? Did you have to take subjects?"

I nodded. "Yeah, but it's fine. As long as I graduate on time..."

Dheia smiled. "Ofcourse!"

"You and Kiro will make such a cute couple!" Jakie said drunkenly. "Ofcourse, besides the politics."

Kumunot ang noo ko. "Well, I don't think politics has something to do with us."

"Yes and it's good! Because you know, sometimes, people just do things because may angle na good for image or for peace talks. I'm sure you're not like that."

Lumunok ako.

"Ofcourse, not."

"And I'm not saying Akiro's like that. I mean, he barely talks about politics."

Sumabay ako sa kanilang dalawa. Dheia snapped a picture of us together. Jackie was drunk so Dheia had to pull her out. I laughed until someone stepped on my feet. I groaned and cursed loudly.

"Who the hell..." I stopped when I saw Darleen infront of me.

Nawala na sila Dheia doon. I sighed and turned my back. Maglalakad na sana ako pero hinila ni Darleen ang kamay ko.

"I didn't know you're here!" she sounded excited and fake. "I see you have friends now. You made it to Akiro's friend group."

I gritted my teeth. "I know. Life sucks for you, Darleen. If you don't mind, I need to see—"

"Let's dance!" she pulled my hand. Malakas ko iyong hinila sa kaniya na para bang nandidiri pa dahil hinawakan niya. I wiped it in my skirt.

Darleen smiled. "I'm not here to fight you, Winona. I'm actually concerned with you. I didn't know how much desperate you are. Talagang sinisiksik mo pa ang sarili mo sa friend group ni Akiro?"

Humalukipkip ako. Hindi niya ako mauuto. I know behind those words is a knife, ready to stab me any minute and I'm not going to be here for it.

"I'm not fighting for men here, Darleen. If you want him so bad, get him. Hindi ko na kasalanan kung ayaw niya sayo."

I pushed a button on her. Parang kapag kinalabit ko siya ay aalisin na niya lahat ng buhok ko!

"You really think he likes you, huh?" she said.

I licked my lips and rolled my eyes. "He's screaming it to my face, Darleen. It's funny, is it? You've probably eyeing him for so long and I have been here for what? Two months?"

"You haven't realized it yet, haven't you?" she laughed. "His dad’s been struggling to win people over ever so they’ve been trying everything to look more connected. They're Japanese, Winona. You know how it works for people."

I gritted my teeth. It's like she's telling me how to connect the dots. Hindi ako nagpatinag. Honestly, I didn't realize that. I didn't care about that.

Tumikhim ako. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm just saying," she shrugged. "Akiro loves his family. You’d be surprised how far people go when their family’s name is on the line. I know you understand."

I swallowed hard.

Oh, I do. I very much understand.

I took a sigh and smiled. "Don't worry. If anything, we'd be benefiting with each other. I just don't think he'll like you even after the election. Goodluck, though."

Tumalikod ako.

That quiet confidence that used to draw me in now made my blood boil. Because suddenly, all I could think of was how good he was at pretending. How easy it must be for him to make anyone believe what he wanted them to.

Shannon was right all along. I shouldn't just shrug it off. May nararamdaman na ako. Malinaw iyon. I won't let it happen.

That’s the thing about lies... they only work when the other person doesn’t know they’re being lied to.

And now I did.

I found Akiro in the crowd. He was searching for someone. Furiously. When he spotted me, his eyes relaxed.

Umigting ang panga niya at kulang nalang ibalibag ang mga nasasalubong niya para sa akin.

"Dheia said you got lost," he said. "Are you okay? Do you want to go home?"

I looked at him.

Kumuyom ang palad ko.

Ngumiti ako at tumango. I grabbed his nape and slowly pulled him. Kumunot ang noo niya. My lips parted as I brushed my lips against his.

The music was loud yet my heartbeat was louder. I wanted to make it stop. My anger wanted to make it stop. I pulled him more as my kiss became more aggressive. Diniin ko na para bang mawawala kaagad ang nararamdaman ko.

I pulled away, catching my breath.

Akiro's lips was redder. He looked at me, confused and amused.

I licked my lips. "Now, we're even."

Kabanata 16

Daddy wanted me to attend this event so bad. Ever since the campaign started, he had been really busy. I saw some of his tarpaulins on the streets. People gathered in our house like everyday is a meeting or something.

I wore a backless black dress and a pair of stilettos. It's a Gala dinner and my dad is one of the keynote speaker as a potential leader of the city. There will be medias and such.

"We'll be meeting a lot of people there, Win. Some of my friends in politics here before," he said. "So I want you in your best behavior."

Tumango ako. "Yes, dad."

The event was held in Baguio Country Club. Back when my father was a congressman in this city, he gained a lot of friends. But when my mother died and we had to move to Manila, all of his friends never showed up for him.

Nakasunod ako kay Daddy habang nakikipagbatian siya sa mga tao. People flocked around him to greet. I saw some media talking pictures of him, well, including me.

"Congressman Lopez," one man said and shook hands with Daddy.

Dad laughed. "It's been a while since someone called me that. Good to see you, Emman."

Tumawa ang lalaki at tinignan ako. "Heto na ba si Winona?"

"Ah, oo. My unica hija."

I smiled. "Hello, po."

"She looks exactly like Grace," the man complemented. "Dalaga na. She probably doesn't remember me anymore!"

Tipid akong ngumiti. Dad just laughed.

"I must say, Cong Lopez, Baguio’s always open to old friends returning. Especially when they’ve left such a mark. We still talk when you handled the Burnham redevelopment."

Dad nodded and laughed humbly. "Well, I only did what I could. And I hope I have your support, Emman."

Emman tapped my father's back. "Yes, ofcourse."

The party started. My father was busy talking to people. Medyo nagsimula akong mainip dahil wala akong ginawa kung hindi bumuntot at bumuntot kay Daddy. I kept my proper posture as I eyed the cocktails that the waiter roams around.

Gusto ko kumuha pero baka hampasin ako ni Daddy.

"Mr. Lopez," someone talked behind us. Parehas kaming lumingon ni Daddy.

A tall well-dressed Japanese man greeted us. He looked respectable and proper. He wasn't smiling but you can see that he is calm. Lumihis ang tingin ko sa babaeng katabi niya, which I guessed was his wife. She looked youthful for her age. Porcelain skin, clean jewelry and small smile on her lips.

Parang hinihila ng mala-ibong mata ni Akiro ang atensyon ko. He was beside his father. He clenched his jaw when he saw me. His eyes were relaxed and it was stuck on me. Not moving like there's no one else to look.

"Mr. Ayasaki," my dad greeted and both of them shaked hands. "It's good to see you again."

I slightly bowed my head. Both of their parents bowed a bit for my gesture.

"The pleasure is mine," his accent carried that faint Japanese lilt, smooth and diplomatic.

Medias flocked around us when they spotted. Kumunot ng kaunti ang noo ni Akiro nang mabangga ako ng isang reporter. Matalim ang tingin niya sa lalaki.

"Can we get a photo of both of you, sir?" the journalist said.

Daddy nodded. "Sure, sure! Why not?"

Lumihis ako nang magkumpulan pa sila lalo. Dad and Mr. Ayasaki went in the middle for photo. I groaned a bit until I felt a hand behind me. Nilingon ko si Akiro na pumunta sa likod ko para ilihis ako sa mga kumukuha ng litrato sa parehong ama namin.

Akiro gripped my waist. "May atraso ka pa sa akin..." he whispered.

"What are you talking about, Akiro?"

"Hmm, really..." he sniffed my hair. "Maybe I should kiss you again so you can remember."

I swallowed hard. He doesn't stop, does he?

"You really won't let it go, huh?"

He bit his lips. "Not when it's the best part of my week."

I would smack his face right now.

I tapped his chest. "Well, you're going to get a lot of it from now on."

Umangat ang kilay niya.

I pulled his coat closer and tiptoed to his ear. "Sinasagot na kita."

Kumindat ako.

From the side of my eyes, I saw both of our parents looking at us. Tumalikod na ako at iniwan si Akiro na nakatitig sa akin. I smiled at him as I put my hands on my father's arm. I saw him clenching his jaw and glaring at me.

I don't play games I don't plan on winning, Akiro. I won't fall for your lies. You will, for mine.

Akiro's eyes were all over me the whole night. Nasa ibang table siya at kulang na lang bantayan niya lahat ng kilos ko. I watched how he grabbed every cocktail that passes infront of him. Prente lamang akong nakaupo.

"What were you talking about with the Ayasaki's son, hija?"

I smiled. "Just school."

"You seem very close."

"Yep. Very close," nanliit paningin ko.

Saksakin niyo na lang ako.

Dad's smile grew. "I knew you'd like him eventually, hija. What changes?"

I shrugged and sipped on my water. "We spend a lot of time at school, Dad. I just... learned to like him, I guess."

Gusto ko masuka sa mga sinasabi ko.

"Maganda 'yan, kung ganoon, Winona. It's better for people to see us get along. We have to keep things civil so people could see us professional and respectful."

Tumango ako at hindi nagsalita.

I stood up for restroom. Sa gilid ng mata ko, nakita ko si Akiro na nakaabang sa gagawin ko. I rushed myself to the restroom. Kulang na lang ay takbuhin ko iyon at i-lock na para bang hinahabol ako ng halimaw!

I stayed in the restroom for almost twenty minutes. I prayed for Akiro to go away.

Mali ako dahil paglabas ko palang ay nandoon na ang halimaw. Nakasandal sa dingding at nakapamulsa. He has cigarette in his mouth. Sinisindi pa lamang niya iyon pero hininto kaagad nang makita ako.

The cigarette stayed on his lips. He bore his eyes on me. Namilog ang mata ko at iritadong lumapit. I grabbed his cigarette and threw it.

"What are you thinking?" iritadong sabi ko. "You can't smoke here!"

"If so say so..." pumamulsa siya at inilabas ang cellphone niya. He pressed on something and handed it to me.

Kunot noo kong tinitigan ang cellphone niya. What does he want now?

"Your number."

I raised my eyebrow. "Why?"

He tilted his head. Nanghahamon ang mga mata niya sa akin.

"You're my girlfriend," he said. "I need your contact."

Oh, that...

I swallowed hard and laughed awkwardly. I pressed my lips together. Kung pwede ko lang takbuhan ito, kanina ko pa ginawa.

I grabbed his phone. Padabog kong nilagay ang number ko sa cellphone niya. Binalik ko iyon sa kaniya. His lips smirked a bit. I watched how he gave a name to my number.

Baby, it says.

Nasusuka ako!

"Alright," he stood straight and crouched. Lumapit ang mukha niya sa akin.

Umatras ako kaagad. "What do you think you're doing?"

He stopped and raised his eyebrows. "Kissing you?"

Kumunot ang noo ko. Kumuyom ang palad ko. I forced myself to smile. Parang may string na nakasabit sa katawan ko ngayon. I am trying to fight it.

Tumango ako at ngumisi. Ngumuso ako habang naghihintay ng halik sa kaniya.

Akiro smirked and grabbed my face. He placed his hand on my chin and made my lips open a bit. I watched how his face came near to mine. The next thing I know is I felt his kiss.

I closed my eyes.

The kiss was slow, soft and almost true.

Mabilis iyon pero kahit na humiwalay na siya sa akin ay nakapikit pa din ako. I bit my lips and swallowed hard.

Before I could react, I heard a clicking of camera somewhere. I looked at the entrance of the hall and saw one of the media. He immediately left when he saw me looking at him.

My eyes widened as I pushed Akiro away.

"What the fuck!" I said as I looked Akiro. "Anong ginagawa mo? Habulin natin 'yon!"

Akiro fixed his necktie calmly. "What for?"

"What for!" I exclaimed. "He took photos of us kissing! Our parents will kill us!"

He held my arm. "We're in a relationship, Winona."

"Not in public!" iritado ako.

He raised his eyebrow. "You expect me to keep our relationship?"

"Well, yeah! We're not going to make the election about us, Akiro. Baliw ka ba!"

"This is nothing about elections, Winona," sabi niya. "I don't really care if they photograph it and post it. I would post it myself. So no, I will not keep this relationship a secret just like what you want."

My breath hitched. Humalukipkip ako.

"Wala pa tayong isang araw, nag-aaway na tayo, Akiro. We can't survive a relationship if you won't listen to me!"

Masuyo niyang hinawakan ang baywang ko. He pulled me closer. Umiwas ako ng tingin sa kaniya.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I just can't keep this a secret, baby. Not when I really want it..."

I bit my tongue. Pilit niyang hinahanap ang mata ko pero iniiwas ko iyon. I saw a small smirk on his lips. I can't believe he's staying calm even if a photo of us eating each other's faces is out there.

He kissed my cheek softly. "I'll see what I can do with the photos..."

Nilingon ko siya. "Really?"

He nodded and grabbed my hand to kiss it. "H'wag lang tayo mag-away..."

Tinitigan ko siya. I don't know why but the more he's like this, the more I hate him. He sounded sure. He sounded sincere. I hated it. I hate that I want to believe this gesture.

I licked my lips. "Fine."

I left in the restroom hallway with my questionable decision. I touched my lips and slowly caressed it. Bumaba ang kamay ko sa dibdib ko at dinama ang mabilis na tibok ng puso.

I don't think this is a good idea at all.

Kabanata 17

Akiro Ayasaki added you on Facebook.

kiroayasaki followed you on Instagram.

Akiro Ayasaki liked your photos.

Akiro Ayasaki shared your photos.

I woke up with hundreds of notifications, only from one person. Sunod sunod iyon. I cursed out loud.

He followed me. He liked every single one of my photos on Instagram and Facebook. And he shared my photo! Oh gosh!

It's the most recent photos of me. I was having a small picnic date with myself in Camp John Hay and I took a little bit of photos. Kagabi pa niya iyon shi-nare at may nga nag-iwan pa ng comments!

Allen Glenn: Napindot mo ba 'yan, pre? Astig, ah.

Allen Glenn: 'Yan ang pare kong may bitaw.

Riley Dale Martin: Pre, gising ka na. Na-share mo, pre. Gago! Hahahaha!

Riley Dale Martin: Mukhang anak pa ni Mayor nadali mo, pre. Iba ka talaga sa lahat.

Jacqueline replied to Riley: Gago @Riley, wala pang botohan.

Allen Glenn replied to Jacqueline: Mukhang lilihis na ng ikakampanya 'yan. Team Blue na siya!

Riley Dale Martin replied to Allen Glenn: @Akiro anak, bakit siya pa? Grounded ka muna ok.

Sinapo ko ang noo ko.

That dumbass! He really doesn't want this to be secret! Kulang na lang ipagsigawan niya sa lahat na girlfriend niya ako! Oh god. Even saying it gives me chills.

I checked his messages. He has one on my Messenger.

Akiro Ayasaki: I took care of the photos, just like what I promised. You shouldn't worry now.

I sighed.

I pressed the like button.

Malapit na ang thesis defense namin at lahat kami ay abala ngayon. Our subject are mainly just for thesis meeting and checking. Although ang thesis namin ay ayos na dahil halos angkinin naman lahat ni Akiro ang obligasyon ng lahat.

I saw Akiro outside my classroom. Hindi kami magkaklase ngayon. Sinadya kong sumabay sa mga babaeng kaklase ko para lamang hindi ako mapansin ni Akiro.

"Winona," Akiro called.

Huminto ang mga babaeng kaklase ko. They looked at me, confused. I bit my tongue and rolled my eyes at them. Tamad kong nilingon si Akiro.

"Akiro, what are you doing here?" sabi ko. "Mamaya pa 'yong meeting natin sa thesis."

"The two can't attend," he said. "May klase sila mamaya."

What?

So, dalawa lang kami!

"It's okay. Bukas nalang!" sabi ko.

"We'll do it today."

Ofcourse, not!

"Bukas nalang, Akiro. May klase pa ako ngayon," I lied.

"This was your last class for this week," he said and raised a paper with my schedules in it.

Hinablot ko iyon. "Where the hell did you get this?"

"Dean's office."

Kulang nalang lukutin ko iyon at itapon.

Tumikhim ako at ngumiti. "Uh... sure. Where do you want us to do our thesis?"

"In my place."

"In your what?"

He grabbed my bag and had a small smirk on his lips. "Tatambay sila Allen sa apartment mamaya. We'll do our research before they come so we can join them."

Oh, hell.

I tried to lighten up the conversation because my reaction gives it all.

"Tatambay? What's the occasion?"

"Nothing," he said as he placed my bag on his shoulder. "Papa-inom ako."

"Bakit?" I asked.

"Wala," he smirked.

Bumaling ang ulo ko sa kaliwa. I rolled my eyes. What the hell is he going with this?

Sure enough, he drove me to his apartment. I insisted to use my car but he had different plans. Wala akong nagawa kung hindi ay sumakay na lamang doon.

He wasn't living with his parents, obviously. His apartment didn't look like apartment at all. It looked like a whole-ass house. Dalawang palapag iyon, may maluwang na garahe at maliit na bakuran.

Binulaga ako ng pusa niya. I watched him pick up a orange cat in his shoulders. The cat embraced the large biceps as it stared at me like I was some intruder or something.

"Kimchi," he said.

"Huh?"

"His name."

I laughed. Ngumuso ako. "I think he doesn't like me."

His apartment was wide and neat. A kitchen and sala downstairs, upstairs was his room. May nakasabit na gitara sa dingding niya. I saw a lot of rock band albums on his shelves. Iyon lang ang laman.

He went straight to the kitchen. Paglabas ay dala niya ang laptop niya. Naupo ako sa malawak na sofa at humalukipkip.

"Your house has aircon?" I asked while looking at his huge AC.

He laughed a bit. "I grew up in Japan. I like it cold sometimes."

Ngumisi ako. "And Baguio is not cold enough?"

"Sometimes..." he said.

He sat beside me. He opened his Macbook and our flashdrive. Wala naman na kailangan gawin. We just have to polish this. Akiro and I made almost everything. The two idiots just gets to made this checked by our thesis adviser.

"I'll get you something to drink," sabi niya at tumayo.

I scribbled on his laptop. I scrolled and checked some of our works. Binabasa ko iyon habang pabalik na si Akiro dala dala ang Pepsi at beer in can.

"We're not here to drink," I said and raised my eyebrow.

"Beer's for me."

Nilahad niya sa akin ang Pepsi na bukas na. Kinuha ko iyon at matalim siyang tinignan. He sipped on his beer as he watched me scribble on his Macbook that was in my lap. He grabbed a throw pillow and placed it under the laptop.

"Ed had this checked last time and our only flaw is the margins, right?" I said.

Hindi sumagot si Akiro.

I looked at him and saw that he was just staring at me. I licked my lips and cleared my throat.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Uh hmm..." he whispered.

Umikot ang mata ko. "Alam kong maganda ako, Akiro."

He chuckled huskily. Nanuyo ang lalamunan ko. His hands was beside me, already claiming the other side of my seat. I felt hid huge biceps behind me. Para akong tinetesting ng panahon.

Maduduling na ako kakatingin sa laptop ni Akiro para lamang magfocus at hindi sa kaniya! This is a goddamn trap! Sana hindi na ako pumayag pumunta dito!

"We're not going to make-out here, Kiro. May gagawin pa tayo."

He nodded and rested his chin on my shoulder. "After this, then..."

Pwede...

What the hell, Winona! Wala ito sa script! Maghunos-dili ka!

"No," sabi ko. "You said your friends are coming over later."

"I don't really mind," he murmured. "I want to show them. They've been telling me I couldn't get you... gusto ko ipakita sa kanila."

Matalim ko siyang tinignan. "Well, ayoko, Akiro. I am a conservative woman, you know that."

"Yes, baby..." he kissed my shoulder. "I love that for you..."

I started polishing our thesis. Nanonood lamang si Akiro sa ginagawa ko. I think he is more focused on smelling my hair than to actually focus on the thesis. Everytime I ask for his opinion, he'll just agree on mine. Nagkakasundo naman kami doon dahil hindi niya pinipilit ang gusto niya gaya ng dati.

I think it's one of the perks of being his girlfriend. Sinusunod na niya ako ngayon at hindi na niya ako kinokontra. Iyon lang. Everything aside from that is a con!

Akiro waited for my hand to be free so he could intertwine his. Nilapag ko na ang laptop sa coffee table kaya nagawa na niya iyon. I sipped on my Pepsi. He watched me closely.

"How did you take care of our photos?" I asked.

He licked his lips. "I found the reporter."

"What did you do?"

"Offered him cash," he said.

Kumunot ang noo ko. "How much?"

"One hundred thousand."

"What?"

He pulled me lightly. "Ayaw ko na mag-away tayo, Winona. I don't care if it'll take millions."

Kumuyom ang palad ko. I watched how he caressed my thumb softly. Umawang ng kaunti ang labi ko. I swallowed hard.

"So, he just deleted the photos? O sinabi niya lang na i-dedelete niya iyon?"

"I have the photos."

"What?"

He shrugged. "I liked it."

Umikot ang mata ko. "Ewan ko sayo, Akiro."

He smirked. Ang isang kamay niya'y nasa baywang ko na habang ang isa ay hawak pa din ang kamay ko. I watched how his face came closer to mine. I knew he's going to kiss me and I shouldn't let him.

But for some reason, I just closed my eyes and waited for his lips.

He kissed me softly. I felt a smile on his lips the moment I kissed him back. He pulled my waist closer to his body. My hands were gripping his shirt now. He pushed me down for me to lay to his sofa.

I groaned but my body didn't protest. He's on top of me, kissing my lips down to my cheek and neck.

I bit my lips as I felt his kisses on my neck. Yumakap ako sa leeg niya. He wasn't pushing his body down. Nasa gilid ng balikat ko ang braso niya.

"Kiro..." I called.

"Hmm?"

"We're not going to have sex," sabi ko.

"I know, baby..." he whispered as he sucked my neck.

He stopped to look at the spot he sucked. There's a proud smirk on his lips after staring at it. Hinampas ko ang dibdib niya nang marealize ko iyon. Kinapa ko ang leeg ko habang nakapatong pa din siya sa akin.

"You didn't..."

He bit his lips. "I told you, I want them to know."

Iritado kong tinulak siya palayo. We both sat down. Matalim ko siyang tinignan at tumakbo sa salamin na nakatayo sa sala niya.

My neck has a red spot and I am very pale so it's awkwardly obvious!

"Akiro!" galit na sabi ko.

Prente siyang nakaupo habang pinagmamasdan akong mag-hysterical.

Wala pang sampung minuto ay narinig ko na ang ugong ng sasakyan at murahan sa labas. Nilugay ko ang buhok ko at pilit hinarangan ang sinipsip ni Akiro. He just watched me with his proud smirk ans amused eyes.

Isa isang pumasok ang mga kaibigan niya. I saw Allen and Riley along with a familiar face which I guessed was Juan. Nasa likod si Jackie at Dheia na yakap yakap ang dalawang bote ng JD.

"Hi, Win!" Jackie waved.

Dheia smiled at me and had a teasing look. Riley greeted me with a nod. Lumawak ang ngisi ni Allen at lumapit para akbayan ako. We both looked at Akiro who raised his eyebrow. He tapped the seat beside him and gave me a glare.

Allen laughed and whispered something. "Kiss mo nga ako. Tignan natin mukha niyan."

"What? No," sabi ko.

"Allen..." Akiro warned.

Tumawa si Riley. "Sauli mo na, Allen. Palalayasin tayo n'yan!"

Bumitaw si Allen. Tsaka pa lang ako bumalik sa upuan ko. Malaking irap ang ginawad ko kay Akiro habang inaayos ang buhok ko. I stood straight as he snaked his hands on my waist.

"Balita kay Klaus?" Jackie started as she opened the JD. Tumayo si Riley para kumuha ng mga baso.

Akiro didn't have to move because his friends know the way to his house. He didn't even have to greet them to come in and make themselves comfortable. Binuhat ni Dheia ang pusa ni Akiro at hinaplos haplos sa hita niya.

Ngumiwi si Allen. "FO na raw."

"Gago."

"Ano ba? Ewan ko, si Juan tungin niyo at sila ang bestfriends."

Juan Miguel crossed his arm on his chest. "Busy lang. He's fine."

"Sus. Kahit end of the world, pupunta pa din 'yon, makikipag-inuman. Anong busy busy?"

Dheia sighed. "Maybe he's just handling some things on his own. He doesn't look like the guy who shares somethings."

Sinipa ni Jackie si Riley na kababalik lang. "Eh, ikaw? Kailan ba natin makaka-inuman si Primo?"

"Kapag patay na ako," he said.

"Tang ina mo talaga."

"Kailan ba kayo magbabati?" iritadong tono ni Allen.

"Bati na sila. Nagpapatulong 'yan kay Primo sa thesis."

"Gago," si Riley. "Nagtanong lang ako!"

"Tang ina mo. Ba't hindi kay Akiro? Best in thesis 'to."

Akiro laughed.

"Si Primo lang online kaya siya tinanong ko."

"Sus!" they teased their friend. Naki-tawa din ako.

Dheia handed me a glass of JD. Tinanggap ko iyon. Tumayo si Akiro para turuan si Riley sa speaker niya. I sipped on the JD. I don't drink much but I drink well. Alcohol favors me but it's not my favorite thing to do.

Allen looked at me. "Boyfriend mo na si Akiro?"

Ngumuso. "Parang ganoon na nga."

Pumalakpak si Jackie. "Parang pinilit mo pa 'to, hapon!"

"Anong meron siya na wala ako?" Allen joked and laughed. Binatukan siya ni Juan na nakikisabay sa tawanan.

"Marinig ka ni Kiro, tanga..." si Jackie. "Tignan ko lang kung hindi ka i-ban n'yan dito."

"Joke lang, gago! Bros before hoes!"

"Ugh, Allen! I told you to not say that anymore," Dheia groaned.

Allen grinned at her friend.

"First boyfriend mo ba si Kiro?" Jackie asked me. I felt Akiro went back beside me after teaching Riley the speaker thing.

Sinulyapan ko si Akiro. He grabbed the glass of Jack Daniel's infront of me. It was my glass. Pinanood kong uminom siya doon. I usually don't like people drinking on my glass. But I didn’t protest when it was Akiro.

Umiling ako. "I had one before. In Manila."

"Sino mas gwapo?"

Akiro looked at me. Tumawa ako at hindi sumagot.

"Answer it," Kiro whispered.

I cleared my throat. "Si Akiro..."

Dheia laughed and clapped. Umikot ang mata ni Allen habang si Jackie ay nakangising aso lamang. Uminit ang pisngi ko.

Kiro poked his inner cheek and hid a smirk.

Oh, I think I deserve an oscar here.

"I think Manila boys are different than boys here," Dheia concluded. "I dated one before. Hindi kami magkaintindihan. Conyo!"

I laughed. "Yeah but not all. Not my ex, atleast."

"Do you also party in Manila? Lakas mo uminom, eh!"

"Sakto lang," I smiled. "I hang out with Shannon a lot. My cousin."

"Single?" Riley asked.

Umikot ang mata ko at tumawa. Sinipa ni Akiro ang paa ng kaibigan. Umaray ito at umiling iling.

"Babaero ka pa din. Hindi ka na natuto doon sa isa," Jackie scolded her friend.

Riley poked his inner cheek with his tongue and smirked without humor. I pursed my lips.

Dheia leaned closer to me. "Iniwan kasi 'yan..."

"Oo. Nag-girlfriend ng model, iniwan kasi expired na 'yung gayuma galing sa Quiapo..." Allen shrugged.

"Tang ina niyo." malutong na mura ni Riley.

I laughed. Dheia did, too. Except she stopped and looked at my neck.

"Wait, do you have a rash or..." namilog ang mata niya.

Mabilis kong pinalis ang buhok ko. "Straightener! Yeah, napaso ako!"

Akiro covered his mouth. Nanginig ng kaunti ang balikat niya. Humalakhak si Juan at hinampas ang balikat ng hapon. Matalim kong tinignan si Akiro.

"Except you're not actually hair straightened right now," Jackie smirked.

Tumikhim ako. "I... used it to curl my hair. Yeah... that's it!"

"Tibay talaga ni hapon!"

Sinaway niya ang kaibigan nang makitang hindi na ako natutuwa. "Enough..."

We were drowned by the music. We were expecting something fun but Riley played The Man Who Can't be Moved by The Script. Malakas na kantyawan at tawanan tuloy ang natanggap niya.

"Ry, bili ka pa JD." Jackie said.

"Ano chaser?"

"Ano gusto mo, Win?"

I shrugged. "Just Coke. Hindi masarap kung pa-iba-iba."

Nakipag-apir sa akin si Riley. I laughed.

Kiro leaned on my shoulder and gave it a kiss. I had four shots of JD and he has... well, numerous. I checked the time and it's already 6, almost 7 in the evening.

Hanging out with his friends are nicer than I thought. We shared laughter, teasings. They see me not just as Akiro's girlfriend but also a friend.

"Your car's outside," Akiro whispered to me.

"How?"

"Pina-drive ko."

Kumunot ang noo ko. "Kanino?"

"Pinakuha ko kila Riley kanina," he said. "Do you want to leave..."

I wanted to leave. But I looked at Akiro who's hand is gripping me on my waist, I hesitated.

I sighed. "I'll stay here for a bit."

A smile formed on his lips. He kissed my hand. "Okay."

Kabanata 18

I dressed well in our thesis defense. Akiro was calm and neat. Ang dalawang kasama namin ay tensed. Hinihilot ko ang sentido ko habang pinapakinggan ko ang dalawang kasama namin kung paano magrecite ng iilang laman ng thesis naman.

"Memorize ko talaga 'to, Win, kagabi. Promise!"

"Kabisaduhin mo ulit!" iritado kong sabi.

Nakahalukipkip si Akiro. He pulled my blouse a bit and gave me a relaxed gaze. He always does this every time my voice gets rude or louder.

Mico laughed. "Gagalingan namin, Winona. Mag-Amper tayo. Or doon sa Legarda nalang..."

"Bakit hindi natin planuhin kung paano ito i-dedefend ng maayos?" I sighed.

Tumikhim si Akiro. "I'll help with the introduction."

"Ayun naman pala, Win. Hehe. Kapag nakalimutan ko, titingin na lang ako kay Akiro—"

"We will follow what we've practiced!" matalim kong nilingon si Akiro.

"Baby..." malambing niyang sabi.

My eyes widened a bit. The two crackheads looked like they had heard someone moan or something. Nagkatinginan sila at parehas nila tinikom ang bibig.

Tinignan ko si Akiro. Handa na akong balatan siya ng buhay nang bumukas ang conference room kung saan kami magdedefense. I stabbed my laptop and gave him a dead stare.

The thesis defense was smooth. Akiro tried his best not to help the two every time they stutter with their part. Sa huli, nagpabigay siya at tinulungan ang dalawa. I did what I could, too.

Their questions were not what I expected. I answered everything I know. Nang wala na akong maisagot ay sinasalo ako ni Akiro. Most of the questions were answered by him.

"Alright," the panelists concluded. "Congratulations, Mr. Ayasaki and team."

What?

I didn't dare to butt in. But Akiro did.

"Actually, it's Miss Lopez's team, sir," he said.

Nilingkn ko si Akiro. Kumurap kurap ako. I didn't have to defend it myself.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the panelist smiled at me. "Congratulations Miss Lopez and team. This paper is well-written."

I nodded and smiled. "Thank you."

Tumatalon ang dalawang unggoy naming kasama nang makalabas kami. Both of them are so happy even though all they did was stare at each other and throw corny jokes at me the whole thesis making! Hindi ko na inabalang mainis sa kanilang dalawa.

Akiro held my waist and kissed my forehead. He smiled at me. "Good job, baby..."

Parang sasabog ang puso ko.

I saw Darleen and her group who were bout to enter the conference room. Nakatingin sa amin at halos punitin na ang hawak niyang papel. I swallowed hard. I smiled at her. One that definitely kicked her ass.

Akiro: Your gym membership is over, I heard. Are you renewing?

Me: I won't have time to go to the gym since it's almost Christmas. I might spend the holidays in Manila. Maybe next year nalang.

Akiro: Alright, baby. Just asking. :)

I bit my lips.

Me: Where are you spending the holidays? Going home to Japan?

Akiro: I'll see.

Me: Okay.

Akiro: I have training today. I might be free after. Want to go to a café or something?

Umangat ang kilay ko.

Me: Why are you suddenly taking me to a café, Ayasaki?

Akiro: :)

Akiro: I saw your posts. You love coffee shops a lot. :)

Ngumisi ako.

I don't realize how confusing being in a relationship with Akiro is until I'm here. Back when I was with Rex, he hated being with me all the time. He said that he wanted his me-time, he wanted a time where he does things alone. Kasama na pala ang pambabae doon.

But Akiro is different.

He likes me to be with him wherever he is, whatever he does. He likes to include me.

I wore a red dress with a white bow in my head. Akiro didn't want me to bring my car. Nagprotesta ako doon pero maaga siyang pumunta sa bahay para sunduin ako.

Nagdadabog akong sumakay sa sasakyan niya. I glared at him. He was wearing a black tank top with the side of his tummy showing and black gym shorts as well. That made my outfit pretty stupid.

"The guys and I will play basketball this weekend," he said while driving.

Tumaas ang kilay ko. "You play basketball?"

He nodded. "I'll take you there. Pupunta sila Dheia doon."

I shrugged. "I'll check my schedule."

"I already did. Wala kang klase bukas."

"Well, I think I will have my nails done that day."

"Sa hapon naman ang laro. We'll get them done in the morning."

Ginawad ko siya ng masamang tingin. He didn't care.

Pinarada niya ang sasakyan sa isang café sa hindi ko alam na lugar. The area was filled with pine trees. It's like a café in the middle of the forest. I've never been here. I doubt that I even know this place.

He found us a seat outside where I can have a seat in front of nature. Pinanood ko siyang kumuha ng pagkain namin. He didn't ask me what I wanted and he came back with different things.

Frappe, iced coffee, cheesecake, blueberry cake, and a croissant. I smiled and placed it neatly. He watched me take photos of it just like what I usually post on Instagram.

"When are you going to Manila?" he asked while he prepared my straws.

"Probably second week. Why?"

"Wala..."

I took a quick photo of Akiro while he wasn't looking. Ngumisi ako habang tinitignan ang picture niya. He was looking down with his brows slightly furrowed. I could use this as a Tinder profile picture and girls will come running for those biceps.

I laughed at myself. Tinapat ko ang phone ko sa mga puno. I shot multiple photos and videos. Binaba ko ang cellphone ko at tinignan si Akiro. He was just... watching me.

"What?" mataray na tanong ko.

He shook his head and laughed. "We might be doing this often from now on."

Hindi ako nagsalita kaagad. Well, after the election, I don't think we will.

I nodded and smiled. "Sure..."

I posted his photo in my story on Instagram. I placed a small red heart to add. Ngumisi ako.

"Do you have plans for our internship next year?" I asked Akiro to remove the dead air.

Humalukipkip siya. "You?"

Nanliit ang paningin ko. "You can't follow wherever I go, Akiro. It's an internship. Hindi tayo pwede maglandian doon!"

"Fine," he barely said. "What are your plans?"

"Well, I originally planned to have my internship in Manila but since the election is next year, I'll just have it around the city."

"Why does it have to do with the election?"

I sipped on my drink. "I'm supporting my Dad. Are you?"

He didn't talk.

Tumikhim ako. "Are you... on good terms with your father?"

Wait, was I obvious? Did I give it away?

Akiro looked at me with a serious stare. "No."

"Why?"

His jaw clicked. "I left home."

"They kicked you out?"

"I just left."

Namilog ng kaunti ang mata ko. I nodded and sipped on my drink while staring at him. That makes sense. Dheia said he rarely talks about politics at all. Maybe that's because of it.

Our date or whatever you call it was nicer than I thought. Akala ko kailangan kong pilitin ang sarili kong ngumiti, but it's not like that at all. It was light and I actually enjoyed it.

My phone vibrated for a notification.

kiroayasaki tagged you in a story.

kiroayasaki tagged you in a post.

He posted a photo of me. Nakataas ang cellphone ko habang kinukuhanan ko ng litrato ang pine trees sa harap. I was smiling in the photo.

I caught myself smiling.

Tinikom ko ang bibig ko at umirap.

My story gained a lot of viewers. Akiro also viewed it. Hindi pa siguro siya marunong mag-heart ng story. Wala nga siyang profile at ako lang ang finofollow niya. At ako lamang ang laman ng Instagram niya!

mariashannon_ : :0

mariashannon_: Is this who I'm thinking about?

I rolled my eyes.

jeanwinona: Ugh. Remind me to hide you next time.

mariashannon_: Impakta ka, Winona Jean. Sabi mo pangit!

mariashannon_: Eh mukhang sumasabit ka pa sa biceps niyan.

jeanwinona : Of course not!

mariashannon_: Sabi ko nga ba kakainin mo din ang mga sinabi mo. Masarap ba?

Alin doon?

I rolled my eyes and didn't reply.

Since Daddy has a tight schedule, sinasamantala ko na talaga tuwing kumakain kaming dalawa sa hapag. Hindi ko pa sinasabi sa kaniya na boyfriend ko na si Akiro. I don't want to surprise him with that. He just wanted me to be friends with him. Not to be his girlfriend!

"I heard you defended your thesis well, Winona," Dad said. "Kumusta iyon?"

"Great, Dad," sabi ko. "Akiro helped me with the thesis. I wouldn't be able to defend it without his help."

Which was true.

Daddy raised his eyebrow. "What do you mean, hija? You can do that on your own. You don't need anyone's help."

Lumunok ako.

"May iba akong hindi nasagot na si Akiro ang sumagot, Dad."

He sighed and didn't look happy with that. "So, how's that friend of yours? I told the media that you're friends with him and we gained a lot of praise."

Nahirapan akong ngumuya.

I bit my tongue. "That's good, Daddy."

Daddy looked at me. He noticed the hesitation in my voice. "Yes, Winona. And you should continue being nice to him."

"I heard his Dad is struggling with gaining people's trust because they're Japanese."

Binaba ni Daddy ang magazine na hawak niya. He finally gave his full attention to me.

"People can choose whoever they want to lead, Winona. If they think that they're too foreign for the job, it's just right."

I dropped my fork and spoon. "Hindi ba mahirap iyon? To think that Akiro's not on good terms with his father, too."

Daddy raised his eyebrow. There was a ghost of a smile on his lips. Kumunot ang noo ko. I had a feeling that it was wrong to say that.

"Why?"

Kinagat ko ang labi ko. "He's not living with his parents anymore. He said he left."

Daddy smiled. "Neglected son, huh?"

Kumunot ang noo ko. "He's not neglected."

"Does he have a job?"

"Well, he's a gym coach..."

Dad smiled even more.

Kinilabutan ako.

"Good job, Winona," he said. "Just keep up whatever you're doing. I want to know more, alright?"

I swallowed the bitterness. I smiled and gave my father a nod. Bumuntong hininga ako. Mabigat.

Kabanata 19

Akiro fetched me from my nail appointment. I watched him park his shiny car outside. Hindi pa tapos ang appointment ko kaya naman kailangan niyang umupo at hintayin ako.

He was wearing a black hoodie and gray sweatpants. The hood of his hoodie was on his head. He looked at me as I was sitting pretty. Hindi siya nakangiti pero kalma ang ekspresyon niya.

I smiled at him.

The conversation between my Dad and me last morning haunts me. I'm a spy. I'm lying to Akiro.

But Daddy seemed happy. Daddy wants me to do this. This will help him. Maybe, I'll just think that I'm helping Dad. Yes, that's it.

"Boyfriend mo, ma'am?" the woman doing my nails asked.

Tumango ako.

She giggled a bit. "Japanese, 'no? Ang gwapo. Nagkakaintindihan kayo, ma'am?"

"Language, yes. Attitude, sometimes."

Tumawa siya. "Bagay naman kayo, ma'am. Maganda tapos gwapo. Ilang taon na kayo?"

I cleared my throat. "Bago lang."

"Ah, talaga? Di bale, mukhang magtatagal kayo kasi ma-tyaga naman boyfriend mo."

"Oh, I wish..." I smirked.

I finished my nails. I grabbed my bag while staring at my nails. I wanted a red tip for my nails today. I usually do pastel colors but now, it's out of my comfort zone.

I placed my card in the counter area. The lady just smiled at me and looked at Akiro who was standing behind me.

"Binayaran na po ng boyfriend mo, ma'am."

I looked at Akiro. His eyebrow shut up. My mouth opened and I was about to say something but I immediately closed it. Right. Boyfriend. This is his duty.

I tapped his chest. "Thanks."

He didn't talk. He grabbed my bag for me and opened my door. Pinanood ko si Akiro na hawakan ang baywang ko habang dinadala niya ako sa sasakyan niya. I showed him my nails when I got to his passenger seat.

"Red?" he asked while he was starting his car. "Your nails are usually something with lighter colors."

My smile faded at what he said. Kumurap ako. He knows. He noticed that.

Matagal akong tumingin sa bintana. I felt his hands on my hand, crawling like a magnet. I watched how he intertwined our hands together. Mabilis ang tibok ng puso ko. Umiwas ako ng tingin. My hands gripped his hand tighter. Like I was hanging on a tightrope.

It felt different.

It feels wrong but it feels right.

We arrived at a private basketball court in some village. Bumaba ako kaagad at nakita ang mga kaibigan niyang naglalaro doon.

Allen dropped his towel and waved at me. Tumakbo siya at inakbayan ako. I laughed and pushed him a bit.

"You stink," I commented.

"Gago, hindi pa ako pawis!" Allen said. "Ouch!"

I laughed.

Binalibag ni Akiro ng towel si Allen. Kagat labi nitong hinampas ang ulo ng kaibigan. He smirked when Allen groaned. Tinapik niya ang kamay ni Allen sa balikat ko at halos ibalibag niya iyon.

"Hindi kayo bagay!" Allen shouted at us. Akiro just gave him a middle finger.

Dheia jumped when she saw me. Kumaway ako at lumapit sa kanila. Nilingon ko ang mga kalaban ni Akiro. They gave him a chest bump so I guessed that it was their friends, too.

"Napilit ka din pumunta?" Jackie asked.

I nodded. "Kinda."

"Tss," Dheia rolled her eyes. "Malakas kasi 'yong kalaban kaya nag-aya ng cheering squad."

I laughed. "So we're just going to watch them?"

"Do you smoke?" Jackie asked.

Umiling ako.

"Then, we'll just watch," she smiled.

Ngumuso ako.

There were six of them. Akiro, Allen, Riley, Juan, Klaus, and I guessed that it was Primo. Binuksan ko ang beer habang nakatingin sa court. May tension na kaagad sa kanila kahit sila sila ang magkakampi. I think Primo and Riley are not on good terms right now.

"Buti sumama si Nicklaus?" Jackie was curious.

Dheia shrugged. "Sinama daw ni Primo, eh. Buti nga pinapansin pa tayo."

The game started. Hindi ko masyadong alam kung paano nangyayari ang ganitong laro. Jackie was the one who writes the score. May ibang mga babaeng kasama ang ibang team na nagchecheer sa kanila.

"Have you seen the article about Akiro, Win?" Dheia asked me while I was stuffing chips in ng mouth.

Kumunot ang noo ko at umiling.

"The article talked about him being a neglected son daw," Dheia said. "Apparently, he was kicked out of the house."

Natigilan ako.

Dahan dahan ako lumingon kay Dheia.

"What?"

She shrugged. "Nag-iisip nga ako, eh, kung totoo. Kiro doesn't share anything about that. I just know that he's been living alone."

I bit my lips. "I wonder... how they got that..."

"Right?" she rolled her eyes. "Dungis 'yon sa pangalan ng Dad niya. I saw the comments. They're questioning his parenting, like, paano raw niya ihahandle ang pagiging Mayor kung ganoon siya bilang magulang! Grabe."

I nodded and didn't talk.

Nilingon ko si Akiro. He removed his hoodie and was left with nothing. Nakahubad siya sa pang-itaas habang nagdri-dribble ng bola. Nakakunot ng kaunti ang ulo habang nagmemeeting naman ang mga kasama niya.

"Do you think Akiro saw it already?"

"'Yong article?" Dheia asked. "Siguro. I'm sure he also knows who sold that information out."

Nahirapan akong huminga.

The game started. The first game was fine. Akiro smirked as he combed his hair backwards. Pumaymewang siya at nakangisi kay Allen na unang game pa lang, napa-upo na. Tinapik siya ni Primo at tinulungan tumayo. Iritado si Nicklaus at matalim ang tingin sa kalaban.

"Dumi naman maglaro," Jackie commented as she flipped the board because the other team won.

"Taga saan ba 'yan?"

"Ewan. Nagka-ayaan lang 'nong nag-inuman kami sa Spade."

Nilingon namin ang mga babaeng sumisigaw sa gilid. They're shouting for the other team. May beki pa silang kasama.

"Sa kabilang team muna ako! Go, kuya chinito!" a girl said. They all laughed.

I watched how Akiro snatched the ball from the other team. He dribbled and threw it to Primo who was taller than most of them. Na-shoot niya iyon. Tsaka pa lamang sila nagkaroon ng score.

Dheia jumped. Umuga ang bench dahil sa talon ni Dheia. I clapped.

"Go, Cap!" Dheia cheered. "Itumba mo sila Allen!"

I laughed and clapped with her.

Juan got the ball from the enemy. Mabilis niya itong naipasa kay Akiro na naghihintay lamang sa likod. A player was in front of him but he threw the ball. It was a three-point shot.

"Yes!" I jumped.

He looked at me. May multo ng ngiti sa labi niya.

Dheia and I clapped our hands together. Nilipat ni Jackie ang score at tumitig ng seryoso sa laban. I saw how the girls from the other team glanced at us.

Nagsimula na mainis ang kalaban sa sunod sunod na panalo ng team nila Akiro. I watched how a player purposely grabbed Riley's shirt for him to stop running. Nabitawan niya ang bola at naagaw ito.

"Damn it, man!" iritadong sabi ni Riley. He pushed Primo away from him when he tried to help him.

"Hindi si Primo ang kalaban, pre, ah?" natatawang sabi ni Allen.

Tinapik siya ni Juan at may sinabi. Iritado din ito. Umigting ang panga ni Klaus at umiiling iling. Akiro licked his lips and raised his hand for a time out. Lumapit siya sa team niya at siya itong nagbigay ng instructions.

Umikot ang mata ni Jackie. "They're playing dirty! Where the hell did Allen find these jerks?"

"Sa bar nga!" si Dheia. "Ang dudungis, oh. Mukhang wala talaga silang gagawing maganda."

"They should call it even, then," I said.

"Nah, hindi 'yan papatalo. Kahit umuwi silang basag ang ilong!"

Jackie was right. When the game continued, their game plan was to kick and elbow Akiro's team. Klaus tripped and he was pissed. Akiro was about to shoot it pero siniko siya ng pinakamatangkad sa kabilang grupo.

"Gago!" I shouted. Lumingon sa akin iyong lalaking kalaban.

Akiro stopped and held his stomach. He muttered a curse. Dinaluhan kaagad siya ng mga kaibigan. The guy who did it smirked and shook his head as if he didn't do such a thing but we saw it.

Akiro wasn't playing anymore. He pushed one guy's chest. Kaagad natumba iyong lalaki. Sumunod na sumugod sa kaniya iyong isang kalaban. But he's taller than them. Sinuntok niya iyon sa mukha.

"Fuck!" I cursed out loud.

Jackie stood up. "Akiro!"

Nicklaus took the second punch like he'd been waiting for it. He even had a smirk on his face when the guy flew.

"Klaus! Isa ka pa!" Dheia shouted. "Enough, guys! Enough!"

"Riley, awatin niyo! Ry!"

Tumalon si Allen at sumuntok din. Malakas iyon, kasabay din ng malakas na mura.

"Gago ka talaga, Allen!" Jackie shouted and ran down.

"Oh my god!" Dheia face palmed. "Pinatulan mo pa talaga!"

Riley was pushed and his shirt got ripped. "Tang ina! Mahal 'to, pre!" he started throwing his fist.

"Sabi ko awatin mo! Anak ng teteng ka talaga!"

I was scared to go down. The girls supporting the other team ran down. Noong una'y hinihila ang mga lalaking kasama nila pero nang sinapok ni Jackie iyong isang lalaki ay siya naman ang nakaramdam ng sabunot.

"Jackie!"

Dheia and I ran, too. Akiro was being held by the other team. Sinuntok niya iyon sa sikmura. Iritado talaga siya. He even pulled Riley away just so he could punch the guy who was kicking him.

I removed my heels and threw them at a girl. Namilog ang mata ko nang lingunin niya ako. She ran and grabbed my hair. I screamed and was scared to use my new nails.

"Ew, baho, baho, baho!" I screamed when she raised her hand to grab my hair. I smelled her unusual scented armpit!

"Guys, enough!" Dheia shouted. "I will call the police!"

"Takbo!" Allen shouted. Kinarga niya si Dheia habang si Jackie ay hinihila si Riley na humahabol pa talaga ng hampas!

Kumaripas sila ng takbo.

I groaned. The girl hugged me so I couldn't leave. Gigil kong kinurot ang braso niya.

"Hawak ko 'to!" the girl I'm fighting with said to his friends.

"Winona, fuck!" Akiro pushed someone just to get to me.

He held my hand that was holding the girl's hair. Hingal na hingal ako habang nakatingin kay Akiro at hawak hawak ko ang buhok ng babae.

"Let go."

"No!" sabi ko.

"Bitch!" the girl reacted.

Akiro clenched his jaw. "Let it go, Winona."

"Tell her that!"

Pumikit siya.

He didn't have any choice. Namilog ang paa ko nang hawiin niya ang kamay ko. Sumama ang iilang buhok ng babae nang alisin niya iyon. He lifted me up on his shoulder.

Kumawag ako.

"My heels! My fucking heels, Akiro!"

"Bibilhan kita ng bago!" he shouted back. "We have to leave!"

Sinakay ako ni Akiro sa passenger seat niya. I saw how the other players were looking at us angrily. I even heard some cussing. Klaus had Jackie on his bike. Others have their cars.

Iritadong sumakay si Akiro. He didn’t have his hoodie back so he's just topless now. Tumitig ako sa katawan niya at mukha. He's wounded. May sugat siya sa labi, pisngi at ang katawan niya ay may sugat din.

"Maybe we should drop by a drugstore..." Tahimik na sabi ko habang nagmamaneho siya.

"Why? Are you hurt?" he asked as if he didn't feel anything himself.

"'Yang sugat mo..." I said.

He licked his lips. "I'm fine."

I swallowed hard. "Let's drop by to be sure."

He clenched his jaw. He didn't talk. Hindi niya sinundan ang sasakyan nila Allen. Lumiko siya sa hindi ko alam na direksyon. Humigpit ang hawak ko sa seatbelt.

He stopped in front of his apartment. Lumabas siya doon. He opened the door of the passenger seat. Malamig ang mga tingin niya sa akin.

I kept thinking about the article. Maybe he knows that I was the one who told my father about it.

"Out."

Tumikhim ako at lumabas. Tumalikod siya sa akin at dumiretso sa loob.

I was scared of him. Truly.

Sumunod ako kaagad sa kaniya. He went straight to his kitchen. Nakita ko ang pusa niyang nakaupo sa sofa at nakamasid sa amin. I glared at the cat.

He washed his hands in the kitchen. Sumandal ako sa kitchen stool. I saw how he grabbed something in the drawer. First aid kit.

Kinuha ko iyon sa kaniya. Umigting ang panga niya at pinanood ako. I took out a Betadine and cotton balls. With my small fingers, I carefully placed a bit and stood in front of him.

I put a bit on his lips. He didn't move. He just remained there, watching me. His pupils dilated more and more as he stared at me.

When I got to his cheek, he was struggling to breathe. Umiwas siya ng tingin sa akin. I swallowed hard.

"You could've got hurt there, Winona," he said, firmly.

"My scalp hurts but I think I did more damage." tumawa pa ako.

Umangat ang kilay niya na para bang hindi siya natatawa. Tinikom ko ang bibig ko.

"Hindi ka na dapat sumali..."

"Why did you punch that guy in the first place, Akiro?"

He clenched his jaw. "I couldn't help it."

"It's just a game. You know better than that."

He pulled my waist closer to him. He licked his lips and removed the hair falling on my face.

"He was saying some stuff about you..." he whispered.

My lips parted. "Like what?"

"Dirty stuff..." he clicked his jaw. "I wanted to shut him up."

I sighed. I touched his massive chest. Kinagat ko ang labi ko at tumingala kay Akiro. He was searching for my eye.

"Natakot ba kita, mahal?" he asked softly.

I sighed. "I was just worried that you would get hurt."

His lips turned into a smirk. Umikot ang mata ko. Hindi ko alam kung papaano siya ngumingiti kahit na may bangas siya sa mukha.

"Why are you smiling?" iritadong sabi ko.

He bit his lips and pulled my waist even closer. I felt something on my tummy! I pushed his chest lightly.

"Feels good to know that you're worried."

"It's not funny! I would win that fight if I didn't just get my nails done!" hinampas ko ang dibdib niya. Nagsisi ako kaagad nang umaray siya dahil doon.

He pouted. "Give me a kiss."

"Kiro..." I slightly pushed him.

"Please, baby. I'm hurt..."

I rolled my eyes.

I tiptoed and gave him a small kiss. Ngunit kulang pa iyon sa kaniya. He crouched to kiss me better. I tasted bitterness on his lips. It didn’t matter.

It never mattered.

Kabanata 20

"So, you're telling me that you're his girlfriend now?" Shannon's mouth dropped when I told her.

I covered my face with my palm. I looked at the paperbag that Akiro gave me after our class. It's a Hermes paperbag with a pair of heels that supposed to replace the shoe that I lost.

Thought you'd look good with these. :)
- A

Kinagat ko ang labi ko.

"Yep..."

"Are you kidding me? Is this serious?" she panicked.

I sighed. "He's not actually my boyfriend. Well, I'm benefiting from him! I gained informations about his relationship with his father. I told Daddy about it."

"Winona," she gasped. "You're spying on him!"

I couldn't react anything. My mouth hanged and I tried to find words to defend myself but I couldn't find anything. I sighed. Ginulo ko ang buhok ko at binaon ang mukha ko sa unan.

"It is spying," I looked away. "But for a reason."

"And you're lying to him, Nona! You're using him."

"I'm not using him!" tanggi ko. "I'm just getting... information. Small things."

Really?

"That could ruin his father?" she rolled her eyes.

I sighed. "Shan, I agreed to do this. Isa pa, if I gathered bad informations, am I just helping the city to prove that they shouldn't vote for them?"

Shan paused. "Fine. But are you sure this is just about Tito?"

"What else would this be?"

"I don't know, maybe you've fallen in love with that Japanese—"

"Ofcourse not!" iling ko. "This is just about my Dad, Shan. I believe that he deserves this chance after everything that has happened to us. I never saw him this determined and happy."

"Alright, Win. I'm just looking out for you. I told Rex that you're still single so..."

Umirap ako. "I moved on, Shan. I don't think of him at all."

"He plans on visiting you there. Sabi ko ay h'wag na. Pero noong nalaman niyang single ka pa, baka

ituloy!" she said.

"He's just wasting his time. I'm planning to have my Christmas break in Manila."

Shan clapped. "Talaga? Oh gosh, Mommy's talking about Korea this holiday but I'm going to stay if you're coming here."

I smiled. "You should. I don't have any friend to hang out with, you know."

In school, Akiro can be very clingy. He waits for me before entering our classroom. Sinusundo ako sa bahay para hindj ko na dalhin ang sasakyan ko at hinahatid din. Kulang nalang ay sumabit ako sa kaniya dahil kung nasaan siya, nandoon din ako!

Hindi na din muli nanggulo si Darleen sa akin. Although, she never forgets to give me a glare. Mas pumayapa ang buhay ko.

Maa napapadalas ang pagsama ko sa mga kaibigan ni Akiro. Most of the time, we hang out in bars. Minsan, kila Akiro o kaya naman sa bahay nila. I would want us to hang out in our house but Daddy always has company over.

"Leaving tomorrow?" Akiro asked as I sat beside him while he was closing his eyes.

I picked up his cat and placed him on my lap. I nodded. Kaaalis lang ng mga kaibigan ni Akiro. I helped him clean up. Parehas kaming naka-inom pero hindi naman lasing.

"I'll be back after New Year," I said. "Daddy would be busy so he won't have time to prepare but he'll be in Manila to celebrate, ofcourse."

Akiro stared at me and nodded. "Alright."

Ngumiti ako. I looked at the papers in the coffee table. It's a scratch paper where Akiro writes the chords or something. I looked at it and grabbed a pen.

I wrote his name. Only Japanese.

Madalas kong pinapanood kung paano niya isulat ang pangalan niya sa Japanese. Sinusundan ko lang iyong alam ko.

I felt Akiro's arm behind me. He placed his feet behind me so I could be between his feet. Sumandal ako sa dibdib niya at pinakita sa kaniya ang ginagawa ko.

Kinagat ko ang labi ko. "Is this right?"

"No," he chuckled. He held my hand and wrote a completely different one.

Mabilis siya. I touched the name he wrote with my hands. Ngunit hindi pa siya tapos. Sa ibaba, he wrote another one.

"What's this?"

"Your name," he breathed on my ear.

I nodded. Sinundan ko iyon isulat. Akiro watched as I tried my best to write it.

"Do you have any sibling?" I asked him while writing.

He nodded. "I have a sister."

"Talaga?" medyo gulat. "I never seen her."

"She's in Japan."

"Kailan pa?"

"Since birth."

"Really? She never visited here?"

Umiling si Akiro. "She got married there."

I nodded. Madilim na sa labas at parehas kaming amoy alak. Tumagilid ako sa kaniya para magharap kaming dalawa. I thought about this question a lot.

"Are you marrying a Japanese, too?"

The question struck him like I do.

He licked his lips. "I don't believe in marriage."

"Talaga, bakit..."

"I just don't."

Tumaas ang kilay ko. "Well, a person doesn’t believe in something usually comes for a reason."

Akiro tilted his head. "Am I in your session, doctor?"

I nodded. "Uh-hmm!"

He chuckled and looked at me with such amusement. He held my hand and kissed it. Namumungay ang mata niya sa akin.

"Watching two people stay together out of habit, not love, kills the idea of marriage for me."

I swallowed.

"So... ayaw mo na?" sabi ko. "Ever?"

"I don't know."

"Say we stay together for a long time, are you marrying me?"

"Mahal..." he laughed. Gigil niya akong hinalikan sa pisngi.

"What?" seryoso ako doon.

"Hmm," he paused to think. Inaantay ko ang sasabihin niya nang hilain ako para halikan.

I closed my eyes and let him kiss me. Nanliliyo ang mga halik ni Akiro. Nawala sa isip ko ang tanong ko. I was more focused on his kisses not my spying. Kinagat ko ang labi niya. I moaned like I was the one who got bit.

"Kiro," I called. "Answer my question..."

He chuckled and kissed my neck. "Shh."

His hands crawled on my stomach. Tila may gustong abutin pero hindi niya maabot. O ayaw niya lang. I felt him hesitating. He was controlling himself.

Humawak ako ng mahigpit sa leeg ni Akiro. He pushed me until I was at the edge of the sofa. Bumaba ang halik niya sa dibdib ko. I almost gasped.

"Answer my question first," I whispered.

"Damn it, baby," he whispered on my ear. "It's turning me on when you ask me about marriage."

Bahagya akong nagulat.

Nagkatinginan kami. My eyes dropped on his lips. Nakaawang iyon at tila uhaw. Nakapatong na siya sa akin. May tumutusok na din sa akin sa bandang puson ko. Kinagat ko ang labi ko.

"Don't bite your lips," he said with authority.

Umawang ang labi ko. I couldn't move anymore. Akiro let out a chuckle as he kissed me deeply. Hungrily. I tasted alcohol and a bit of cigarette mint. My legs opened so I could lock him.

I groaned when he started moving on top of me. I felt his member kicking his pants, and kicking me! It hit the exact spot so I moaned a bit.

Nagkatinginan kami.

He clicked his jaw. Binaon niya ang ulo niya sa leeg ko. He stopped moving.

"Sorry," he said.

All I thought about is why he stopped! Damn it, Winona.

I realized that I'm a virgin and Akiro is probably not. A lot of girls like him and I'm sure he has dated before. He's probably had a lot of girls on his bed. He's experienced. I'm not.

At girlfriend niya ako.

He has needs, too. But he never asked it for me. He never touched me anywhere. He never brought it out.

Noong si Rex kasi, hindi ko masyadong gusto. I kiss him, alright. But that was it. Ilang beses ako pinipilit

ni Rex noon pero hindi ako pumapayag. I wasn't sure of him before. I was scared that if I'd give my first time to him, he would just waste it.

But with Akiro, it's... confusing.

I thought that what I was feeling will fade if I spent some time away from him. Kaya naman wala iyon sa isip ko nang pumunta ako sa Manila para sa Christmas break.

Shannon and I spent my first week going out. Noong una ay tumatambay kami sa BGC at tulad ng dati, we would catch up about things we missed out on life. After that, we'd sleepover our condo or have a drink in Xylo.

"Na-miss ko 'to!" Shan screamed while she drowned herself with Bacardi. "I haven't went here for like, a long time! H'wag ka na bumalik doon, Nona!"

I smiled. "Oh, I wish!"

I chuckled when she poured a glass of Bacardi on my mouth. She took a video of me sipping every bit of it.

"How are you and your fake boyfriend, anyway?" tumawa si Shannon.

Umikot ang mata ko. I've been here for one week. I honestly thought he'd message me when I left but he didn't. Wala pa siyang message sa akin! I didn't message him but I was assuming he'd message me.

"I don't want to think about it right now, Shan."

"Bakit?" tanong niya. "Malapit na ang election. You can finally kiss his ass goodbye!"

I licked my lips. "Yeah..."

"He's probably mid," she concluded. "Mas gwapo pa siguro si Rex doon. If he asks for a kiss, just close your eyes and think about Rex! Para ganahan ka!"

Hilaw akong tumawa. "Right."

She gasped. "Since you're pretending to be his girlfriend, did he ever asked you to have sex?"

Muntik ko na maibuga ang iniinom ko.

"Shannon! What kind of question is that?"

"I just can’t imagine you two doing anything remotely romantic, let alone…" she wiggled her eyebrows, "... that."

"Hindi, Shan!"

"Eh, ano lang? Not even a kiss?"

"Well..."

Namilog ang mata niya. "Oh my god."

I swallowed hard. "It was just a part of the plan!

"The plan?" she wheezed. "Since when does espionage involved tongue!"

"It wouldn't be believable if I don't kiss him, Shannon! I'm his girlfriend. Atleast that's what he believes!"

Hinilot niya ang sentido niya.

Hindi ako komportable. Not when everything Shannon says is wrong. I kissed him! I kissed him and I wanted more. I never saw anyone while kissing him. It's just him. Wala akong dapat isipin habang naghahalikan kami dahil occupied na ang utak ko sa kaniya!

"Ano ang sasabihin mo kay Tito? Does he even know that you're doing this?"

"No," sabi ko at binuhusan ng alak ang baso ko. "Hindi 'yon importante."

"Well, it actually is!" sinapo niya ang noo niya. "What are you gonna day? Daddy, yes, I kissed him but this is just for the campaign—"

"Stop it," sabi ko. "Have you seen the charts, Shan? Dad's almost taking over the top because of the article about Akiro's Dad."

"About neglecting his son?"

"No, not just that..." I sighed. "About their failed marriage."

"What?" she gasped. "He told you about that, too?"

Hindi ako nagsalita. I drowned myself with alcohol. I'm evil. I should be in hell.

Shannon looked at me. "And he still hasn't have a clue you're lying to him?"

I licked my lips. "The article didn't directly came from Dad. It's just rumors. But it affected their team."

"Kahit na! Sayo niya lang iyon sinasabi. And you're obviously an enemy, still."

"I don't know, Shan. Maybe he has a clue. Maybe he's planning something and he's just waiting for an information from me, too."

"O baka naman, he's really in love with you."

I scoffed. I laughed at her. Only to realize that she was serious about that.

"Ikaw na ang nagsabi sa akin. I shouldn't trust him, right?" I said.

"Well, maybe we're both wrong. I don't think he doesn't know that you're the one who's spying informations about his father, Winona."

Sumandal ako. "What? He just giving it away? He could've dump me if he knew, Shannon."

"Iyon na nga! He likes you that he doesn't mind!"

"Oh, snap out of it. You read a lot of romance books!"

"Ewan ko sa inyo!" she sounded done. "Psychology major nga kayong dalawa!"

I stared at Shannon as she walked to grab us another bottle. Hindi maalis ang isip ko sa sinabi niya. Pinikit ko ang mata ko.

It's just alcohol. Mawawala din ito bukas.

Kabanata 21

kiroayasaki is calling you.

I accepted his call. Kagigising ko lang galing sa malalang inuman kasama si Shannon kagabi. I slept on the couch of our condo. Hindi na ako naka-akyat para magbihis.

"Morning," Akiro's voice soothed something.

I sat straight. Matalim kong tinignan si Akiro. I saw that he was in bed. Nakapatong ang puting kumot sa katawan ni Akiro hanggang dibdib pero kita ko kaagad na wala siyang saplot sa itaas.

He chuckled when he saw how I glared at him on the screen.

"I had a bad signal for a week, baby, I'm sorry..." he whispered.

"Bakit? Nasaan ka ba?"

"Osaka."

I pouted. Kinagat ni Akiro ang labi niya habang nakatingin sa akin. His eyes were a bit amused.

He shifted a bit. "Send me your photos."

I uploaded photos last night. Nasa steakhouse kami ni Shannon at naisip lang namin na kumuha ng pictures na magkasama.

"I already uploaded my pictures, Kiro. Nandoon naman sa IG ko..."

"I want a different one," he said softly. "The one you haven't posted. 'Yong akin lang..."

Kinagat ko ang dila ko.

"Hindi 'yon magaganda. I didn't post it because I didn’t like it."

"Send it to me."

"Hindi maganda 'yon, Akiro..."

"I doubt it," he said. "Send it to me, please. I missed you."

"Fine..." tumikhim ako.

I sent him some of my draft photos from last night. Ang iba ay iyong selfie ko na nakadila at nakangiti ng malaki. I even snapped a video of me laughing because of Shannon's dance. I also sent it to him.

Napanood ko ang reaksyon ni Akiro habang pinapanood niya iyong mga sinend ko. Seryoso ang mukha niya. He clenched his jaw and licked his lips. Kumunot ang noo ko. Didn't he like it?

Ine-expect kong malawak ang ngiti niya pero parang hindi naman.

"I told you, it's ugly..." sabi ko, bahagyang nagsisi na nagsend pa ako sa kaniya.

He clicked his jaw. "When are you exactly in Manila?"

"Makati," I said. "Why?"

"Nothing..."

Akiro is spending his holidays in Japan with his family. He said that he's been doing a lot of hiking there. Nahihiya naman akong sabihin na wala akong ginawa kung hindi mamasyal at uminom sa Manila.

Shannon invited me to a different club that we used to go to. Hindi naman ako maka-hindi dahil wala din naman akong gagawin sa condo. Shannon lives in a subdivision with the rest of my family. Dad bought me this condo when I turned eighteen because it's a walking distance to my school.

kiroayasaki: Where are you...

jeanwinona: Shannon's taking me to a club.

kiroayasaki: Where?

jeanwinona: Pasay lang.

He didn't reply.

I wore a navy blue tube top and a maong skirt. I curled my hair a bit. Hindi na ako masyadong nag-effort sa make-up dahil magugulo din iyon mamaya kapag uminom kami ng madami.

We were greeted by Shannon's friends. Mas maraming kaibigan sa akin si Shannon. She knows everyone and sometimes it amazes me. Para sa akin kasi, siya lang ang kaibigan ko. I'm not a friendly person.

"Winona, long time no see!" some of Shannon's friends greeted me.

"Hello," tipid kong sabi.

Shan pulled me. "We'll be hanging out with them!"

"What? Sabi mo tayo lang."

"Ano ka ba, Win. I'm sure you were bored as fuck in Baguio that's why I invited them."

I sat beside her. Her friends smiled at me. Karamihan ay lalaki. Bumubuga sa hangin ng usok galing sa sigarilyo o kung hindi man, sa vape. They were all drunk when we got there. Kanina pa sila nagsimula.

I shifted uncomfortably. "I actually made friends in Baguio."

Shan laughed like I was kidding. "I know you!"

I sighed.

A guy gave me a drink. Kuryoso ko iyong tinignan.

He laughed. "Don't worry, nothing's in there. Unless you want some."

Kumunot ang noo ko. I looked at Shannon with such questions in my eyes. Saan ba niya nakukuha ang mga ito?

"You guys are scaring my cousin," she laughed. "She's pretty introverted, guys. Pero malakas ito uminom! Don't underestimate her."

"Single ba, Shan?"

Sumimsim ako. "Nope—"

"Very much!" Shannon cut me off.

Nilingon ko siya. Shannon winked at me. Sinapo ko ang noo ko.

"Talaga?" the guy looked at me. "So it's okay if I get your Instagram?"

Umiling ako. "No, thank you. I'm really not interested."

They teased the guy after my rejection. Shannon smiled awkwardly at her friends. I grabbed a glass of Cuervo on the table and drank it off.

"Ano ka ba, Win. They're just making friends! Of course, you can be mutuals on Instagram," Shannon said. "I'll give you her Instagram later."

Iritado kong nilingon si Shan. I sighed and stood up. "I'm gonna get a beer."

Hindi ko gusto iyon. I don't know what's up with Shannon that she keeps pushing me to her friends! I wanted to go home but I don't want to be rude.

I went to the counter and ordered myself a cocktail. Pinaglaruan ko ang payong sa aking inumin. I opened my phone and pressed directly to Akiro's messages.

Going out with Shannon and her friends just made my confusion worse. Naisip ko bigla ang mga kaibigan ni Akiro. I hang out with them a lot. I realized that they're more fun to be with because they're true and wholesome. They might bond with alcohol and stuff but they're not like these people.

"Winona?" someone called behind me.

I turned around, only to find Rex.

Tumuwid ako ng upo. I watched how he sat next to me with his amused smile. He scanned me.

"Whoa. Hindi kita nakilala, Win. Something changed," he said. "I mean, you look different. Different but good."

I sipped on my cocktail. Rex changed, too. He seemed more calm than the last time I saw him. He's my first boyfriend for a reason. Guwapo pa din siya. His body got a bit bulkier. He also changed his hairstyle.

"What are you doing here, Rex..." medyo naiinis na sabi kpo.

"I heard from Shan that you're here," he said. "I was planning on visiting you in Baguio."

"For what?" I boldly ask. "We're over, Rex. Haven't you moved on?"

He sighed and clenched his jaw. "What I did to you was wrong, Win. I should've never cheated on you. After we broke up, all I did was regret every decision I had made. Nagsisisi ako na nawala ka sa akin."

Oh, come on.

Humalukipkip ako. "That sounds lovely, Rex. But I already moved on."

Ngumisi si Rex. Medyo natawa pa ng kaunti. I raised my eyebrow.

"I also heard from Shan that you're single," he said. "Wala ka bang matipuhan doon sa bundok?"

My mouth parted a bit. I finished the shot of the cocktail. I didn't want to entertain his questions anymore. Hindi ko alam kung lasing siya o kung ano ang nalaklak niya.

"I assumed that you're still in love with me that's why," mayabang na sabi niya.

I laughed. "You're drunk."

Tumayo ako at tumalikod. Mabilis niyang hinuli ang kamay ko. Rex pulled me to look at him.

"Rex, what the hell!" sabi ko.

"I missed you, Win."

I pulled my hand away. "Don't you ever come near me again."

"Damn it, Win! Stop lying. I know you still feel something for me!"

He pulled my waist because I was running away from him. I pushed his chest. Hinampas ko ang dibdib niya.

"Bouncer! Fucking bouncer!"

I screamed when a big bouncer came and knock Rex off. Nagkagulo ang mga tao. Malakas ang music sa bandang dance floor kaya hindi masyadong pansin pero sa bar stool ay nagkagulo dahil sa pagtilapon ni Rex.

"Tang ina..." Rex wiped his mouth that was bleeding mouth.

The bouncer looked at me. Para akong lasing. I saw Akiro infront of me. Kumurap kurap pa ako kung siya talaga iyon, pero siya nga!

My eyes widened. "Kiro..."

He held my hand. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head. I was caught up by what happened but I am more caught up because he's here!

"Winona! What's happening— Oh my god!" Shannon screamed when she saw Rex on the floor. Her eyes flew on me and the guy beside me.

Rex stood up. Hinilot ko ang ulo ko. I looked at Akiro who was ready to throw the second punch. He looked at the guy like he would snap his neck instantly.

"Sino 'yan, Winona?" Rex asked.

Pumagitna ako. "Enough, Rex! You're embarrassing me!"

"Don't tell me you're replacing me for him?" Hindi pa tumitigil ang ex ko. "You're still angry at me. That's why you're doing this."

What?

"No, I'm not doing this for you, Rex."

"Then what?" Rex smirked. "Don't fucking tell me you're in love with him, Win? Is it?"

Shannon looked at me. She bit her lips. We both know what
I was thinking.

Akiro sighed. He grabbed my hands. "Let's go."

"Winona!" Rex screamed my name but Akiro didn't look back.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the crowd. Akiro was angry. I could feel it in the way he was clenching his jaw and holding my hands. Madiin ang hawak niya sa kamay ko, na para bang kapag niluwagan niya iyon ay makakatakbo ako.

He immediately found my Jimny. Pabagsak niyang binaba ang kamay ko.

"Key," he said.

"Akiro-"

"Give me the damn key, Winona," galit na sabi niya. "I'm taking you home."

Aligaga kong kinuha ang susi ko. He opened my passenger seat and placed me there like a child. Hawak hawak ko ang kamay ko habang pinapanood ko siyang galit na pumasok para magmaneho ng sasakyan ko.

Kinagat ko ang labi ko. I know he's mad. He is really mad. Ngayon ko lang siya nakita ganito magalit sa akin. Wait, sa akin? Ano ginawa ko? I'm not the one who punched someone! Dapat ako ang magalit!

"My condo is in Makati..." mahinahong sabi ko.

He didn't talk. I continued pointing directions to him. Hindi niya akk kinausap buong byahe. I was too scared to ask him why he was here.

Bumaba ako sa sasakyan at dumiretso sa lobby ng condo. We took the elevator. And until we reached my condo, he wasn't saying a word.

I opened my door. He watched me as I entered. Pumasok din siya. Bago ko pa man mailapag ang gamit ko ay hinuli na kaagad ni Akiro ang kamay ko. My eyes widened when he pinned me against the door.

"Akiro!" gulat na sabi ko.

"Talk."

Kinagat ko ang labi ko. His pupils dilated as he cornered me. Humigpit ang hawak ko sa handbag ko. Bumaba ang tingin ko sa kamao ni Akiro na namumula. I tried to touch it but he removed his hands.

Kinagat ko ang labi ko. "I was with Shannon, okay? I told you, we went out to drink. I didn't know that Rex would be there. Umiinom ako at bigla siyang sumulpot doon. He told me different things that were obviously, not true. He's drunk, Akiro..."

He poked his inner cheek with his tongue. Binitawan niya ang kamay ko. He clenched his jaw.

"Did he hurt you?"

Umiling ako. "I was just surprised by everything he said. He's not like that, you know."

Umangat ng kaunti ang kilay niya. Galit pa din siya kahit nagpaliwanag na ako.

"Damn it," he cursed.

He lowered his head and rested his head on my shoulder. Ang kamay niya ay nasa gilid ng ulo ko para suportahan ang sarili niya upang hindi ako maipit.

"I'm sorry you had to see that..." he whispered. "Natakot ba kita?"

My breath hitched.

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

"Ang hirap mo iwan," hinalikan niya ang balikat ko. "Malingat lang ako, kukunin ka na sa akin."

My hand crawled on his chest. He stared at my hands on his chest like he was in pain. Nagkatinginan kaming dalawa. I don't know if it was the glass of cocktail but I feel my heart knocking on my chest, wanting to go out.

"I thought you were in Japan..." mahinahong sabi ko.

"I took the first flight after our call this morning."

Humigpit ang kapit ko sa damit sa kaniyang dibdib. I crumpled his shirt now.

"Why?" I asked.

I hoped he answered differently. Maybe he had an emergency he needed to go to. He was homesick. He forgot something. Just not...

"I missed you."

That.

Umiwas ako ng tingin.

This is hard. He's making this hard for me.

He touched my chin. He made me look him in the eye. Umawang ang labi ko. I wanted to say something but his lips owned mine. Pumikit ako at hinayaan siya.

He paused, "I'm so jealous, baby..." he kissed me again. "So damn... jealous."

"Kiro..." I whispered.

"Hmm?" he sucked my lips.

"How about your holidays with your family? Are you still going back?" I asked softly. Pero hindi ko halos matapos iyon dahil sa kahahalik niya sa akin.

He bit his lips. "I'm thinking of spending it with you..."

"What?" I gasped a bit but his lips were on my neck. "You... can't. Magagalit ang pamilya mo."

"Mas magagalit ako kung hindi kita kasama."

"Damn it, Kiro..." I whispered. "We can't..."

"Come with me."

"Huh?" I pushed him lightly.

Namungay ang mga mata niya. "Spend the holidays with me."

"Kiro..." I shook my head.

"I'll be here before and after the holidays, then."

"You're wasting money on that."

"What? You expect me to talk to you on the phone?" Tumaas ang kilay niya. "I don't do calls or texts, Winona. I can't kiss you that way."

Fuck it, Ayasaki!

I closed my eyes when his kisses went down on my cheek and neck. Yumakap ako sa leeg niya. I hampered a bit when he lifted me. He walked until we reached my kitchen table.

Pinaupo niya ako doon. We continued kissing. I felt heat. Umiinit ang paligid pero hindi ako pinagpapawisan. It was a different kind of heat. Kissing wasn’t enough. It wasn’t strong enough for what I feel inside.

His kisses went down to my chest. I moaned a bit. He's resisting the urge to hold me. I could feel it.

"Touch me," I whispered.

Akiro paused. His mouth was open. His eyes has this intense look. Mapungay ang mga mata niya at namumula ang labi kahahalik sa akin.

"Baby..." he whispered.

I held his hand and placed it on my breasts. "Touch me, Akiro."

Kunot ang noo ni Akiro habang hinahawakan ang dibdib ko. He bit his lips and stared at my reaction with his touch. His other hand crawled on my thighs. I was wearing only a thong inside. He parted my legs.

I already knew what he was doing but I gasped when he actually did. Tinukod ko ang dalawang kamay ko sa lamesa. He touched my folds. Tumingala ako. I felt that he was doing circles with his fingers.

"You're drooling," bulong niya.

"Damn it, Kiro..." my voice was eroric enough for Akiro to curse.

He pulled up my short skirt. Matalim niya akong tinignan habang pinipilas niya ang thong ko. He lifted my legs and placed them on his massive shoulders. He pushed me as I lay in the kitchen.

Akiro bit his lips. "Beautiful..."

Kinabahan ako.

"What are you doing, Akiro!" I exclaimed. "Damn it!"

"I'll have what's for me," he said as he started kissing my thighs.

Hindi ko alam kung saan ako kakapit. Sa kaniya ba o sa lamesa. Luminga linga ako na para bang nababaliw.

A soft moan escaped from my lips when he kissed my soft folds. His lips were warm and smooth. Napahawak ako sa sarili kong tuhod habang ginagawa niya iyon. I almost screamed.

"Akiro, ah!" I moaned loudly.

He pulled up. Umigting ang panga niya at ibinaba ang tube top ko ng walang kahirap hirap. My privates were fully exposed while he was still very much clothed. I tried reaching for his pants.

He watched me as I struggled with opening his pants. His lips curved and he helped me with it. Hindi ko alam kung magugulat ako o matatakot nang makita ko siya. Buong buo.

Akiro kissed my lonely lips. Kinagat niya ng kaunti.

"Say it," he whispered. "Say you're mine. This is all... mine."

Pumikit ako. I watched how his top was centered on me. Nanginig ako ng kaunti nang magtama kami. He was hard. I didn't think I could take it. I wouldn't have thought.

"Say it, baby..."

I nodded, desperately. "I'm yours. Damn it, I'm all yours, Akiro!"

A smirk formed on his lips as he owned me. He owned me like he already did.

"I love you," he whispered to me after we both finished together. I watched his hot release on my stomach.

My eyes gazed on his eyes. He kissed me so tenderly that I forgot to breathe.

I bit my lips and nodded as a response. He didn't wait for it. He didn't force me. He just kept on kissing me as if it were the answer for everything he was looking for.

Kabanata 22

I am a conservative woman, I tried telling myself. Rex and I never had sex because I didn’t want to. Every time I tell him that I'm saving myself for marriage, he laughs. He didn't think it was true.

But it was true.

Virginity mattered to me, not because of how men view purity from it. Virginity mattered because it measures my trust in the person I'd give it to. Every time Rex kisses me, I think I was too young, too drunk, to trust him for it.

But when I gave it to Akiro, I wasn't young, I wasn't drunk. I knew what I did. And I did it anyway.

I saw Akiro in my kitchen and I hoped it was a dream.

But it wasn't. I can still feel him inside me, throbbing! I couldn't walk. Pakiramdam ko, mararamdaman ko siya sa loob ko ng isang linggo!

I immediately turned my back when Akiro saw me. Nagkunwari akong kumukuha ng coffee cup. I saw him cooking hotdog, egg and bacon. Iyon lang naman ang laman ng ref ko kaya iyon lang ang lulutuin niya.

"I already made you coffee," he said. Binalik ko tuloy iyong mug na hawak ko.

Naglakad ako patungo sa bar stool. Akiro watched me with his hawk eyes. Umangat ang sulok ng labi niya nang makitang nahihirapan akong maglakad. Let alone, sit.

Tumalon ako nang yumakap si Akiro sa baywang ko at ilagay ang pagkain sa harapan ko. He kissed my neck and stopped for a while. Nilagay niya ang kamay niya sa ulo ko.

"May sinat ka," he whispered.

That's why my head feels heavy. I thought it was the alcohol... or lack of sleep.

Matalim ko siyang tinignan. "You know damn why, Akiro."

He bit his lips and chuckled. Masuyo niyang pinatakan ng halik ang pisngi ko. "Higa ka, hahalikan ko kung saan masakit."

"Kiro!"

"Fine," natatawa niyang sabi. "I'll get you meds."

Pinanood kong umalis si Akiro para bumili ng gamot ko. Doon ko pa lamang na-realize kung ano ang ginawa namin. Hinilamos ko ang palad ko sa mukha ko.

I'm so landi. Oh, my gosh. We had sex! We fucked. He ate me. We had sex and I liked it! No, I didn't. I loved it!

I slapped my face. I'm not doing this because of the plan anymore. This is not a part of the plan! Nakakahiya! Did I just fall for my plan? What am I doing? Was I drunk? I only had one glass of a cocktail.

I wasn't drunk. I was completely sober. Hindi niya naman ako inakit.

Oh, damn it.

Akiro left his phone open. Nagvibrate iyon. Matalim kong tinignan iyon. He doesn't even have a password. Binuksan ko iyon.

It was a group chat.

Allen: Maayong buntag, yeorobun.

Jackie: Solo gaming, Amper. Kupal kasi kayo.

Allen : Bro, dili ko gahatag ug iyot. (I don't give a fuck)

Jackie : Tang inang 'to. Kinagat ka ba ng aso d'yan sa Cebu at tinablan ka na naman ng rabies.

Riley : @Akiro pre, san ka? Nasa Japan ako. Tang ina, lahat kamukha mo, pre.

I laughed a bit.

I scrolled down to his messages. May mga unread messages ng mga babae doon. Puro greetings. I also saw some messages that seemed to me like love letters. I stopped when I saw Darleen's name.

Darleen: Happy holidays, Kiro! I'm with my family in Davao right now. You? :)

He didn't even read it. I scrolled up. Kakaunti ang replies ni Akiro kay Darleen. Ngumisi ako. Nagbasa ako ng kakaunti.

Darleen : Congratulations. Defended din kayo. Though, I know it's all you naman. You're great in thesis. Sayang, hindi tayo ang magkagrupo.

Akiro: Thanks. But it's all Winona.

Darleen: Ah. Ganoon ba. You're welcome, Kiro. :)

She messaged again after that.

Darleen: I saw the articles about your Dad. I've warned you about Winona. Do you think she had something to do with it? It's obviously an inside job. Baka may nasabi ka sa kaniya tungkol sa family mo.

Darleen: I really think this has to do with her, Akiro. Is she your girlfriend now? Well, I think she's faking it to get information about your Dad.

Akiro: Thanks for your concern, Darleen. But Winona has nothing to do with this.

Darleen: Are you sure? Maybe think about it. Baka nga may nasabi ka sa kaniya... I'm just concerned.

Akiro: For the last time, Darleen. I've been very civil to you but if you're putting dirt on Winona's name, I will have to block you.

Darleen: I'm sorry, Kiro. I'm just concerned. But don't worry, your family has been really good to Baguio,

I'm sure a lot of people remember that.

He didn't reply. Kahit ang ibang messages ni Darleen, wala na siyang reply.

There's a cold feeling in my stomach. I bit my lips until they almost bled. I don't know why but I felt heavy to breathe.

Guilt. It's a strong feeling. It's something that I rarely feel. I don't know how you can explain the feeling to someone. It's heavy, like I'm carrying a burden.

I lied to Akiro thinking he was lying to me, too.

I lied to him and realized it was a big help for my father to win against his father. I told every secret he told me. Everything. My father will win and that is because I lied to Akiro. I fooled him. And he doesn't have any clue.

Nakatuko ang kamay ni Akiro sa sandalan ng sofa ko habang nakaupo ako sa tabi niya. His hand were holding a chips on his lap. Doon ako kumukuha ng kinakain ko. We're watching a movie.

Tutok ako doon. I pouted when we got to the sad part of A Walk To Remember. Mandy Moore just died. I sighed. Nilingon ko si Akiro. Only to find out he wasn't watching the movie. He was watching me.

"Hindi ka naman nanonood," sabi ko.

"I am," he whispered. "I'm watching you."

I rolled my eyes. He held my hand. Tinignan ko ang malaking kamay niya na sinasakop ang kamay ko. His thumb brushed my ring finger. Nanatili ang mga mata ko doon.

"I'll be back after Christmas," he whispered.

Ngumuso ako. "Kung iyon ang gusto mo..."

"Uh-hmm," he kissed my hand. Binaba niya iyon sa hita niya. He moved my hand a bit. Inangat niya iyon hanggang sa iba na ang nahawakan ko.

I saw him last night. I don't know about the rumor about Asian men or anything, but they're wrong. I can't even see the difference between him hard or not! He is huge! I couldn't measure it properly but I wasn't blind! I could fit both my hands on it and it would still not be enough!

Binawi ko ang kamay ko. Matalim kong tinignan si Akiro. He chuckled and held his heart.

"I hope you know that I was a virgin and I'm still a conservative woman even after that..." sabi ko.

He pulled me closer and nodded. "I know, baby. That's why I was gentle."

Kumurap ako. "That was gentle? You wrecked me, Ayasaki."

He shrugged. "I can't control that."

Matalim ko siyang tinignan. Ang kapal ng mukhang magyabang ngayon.

"Mukhang nag-enjoy ka naman kagabi... kahit na virgin ako." lumunok ako.

He raised his eyebrow a bit. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, I'm not experienced enough. And maybe, you are. You know how to do it properly. Baka lang, hindi ka nasiyahan sa akin kagabi."

He looked amused. He kissed my shoulders. "You're the only one I'd want to do it over and over again..."

Hindi ako nagsalita. Nagdududa ako doon. Siya lang iyong gumagalaw sa amin. Siguro, habang ginagawa niya iyon ay nangangalay siya at nabobored sa akin.

"And I know that it's your first time and you want to treasure it a lot," malambing na bulong niya. "I hope to be worthy of it..."

Kinagat ko ang labi ko. Nagkatinginan kami. I moved my head to plant a kiss on his lips. His lips curved into a smile as I tried to open his mouth with my lips.

"Shh," he pulled away.

Kumunot ang noo ko. "Why?"

"I figured you already know that you turn me on... really damn fast, Winona," he said. "So, stop seducing me because I know you're still sore."

I groaned.

Akiro and I slept in my bed after a long day spent together. He's leaving tomorrow for Japan to spend Christmas with them but he will be back after. I told him he would waste his money. He didn't care.

Hindi ko alam kung papaanong nalulungkot ako nang umalis si Akiro. I almost forgot that I spent my whole life without him. Ngayon na aalis siya ng ilang araw, nalulungkot ako. He only spent time in my condo for a whole day and when he left, things became more quiet.

I saw some things in my kitchen after Akiro left. Two paper bags with groceries in them with a sticky note.

Noticed you're missing vegetables in your fridge. Brought you some. :)

- Kiro

I smiled. Nakita ko din ang iba't ibang gamot doon. Humalukipkip ako at binasa ang sinulat niyang muli.

For your headache and soreness. Also, some vitamins I hope you take. :)

- Kiro again.

Kinagat ko ang labi ko at pilit alisin ang ngiti.

Shannon and I share everything. She shared that when she got her first kiss, I also shared mine. She shared when she got laid for the first time, but I couldn't share mine.

"So, hinatid ka lang niya sa condo mo tapos bumalik na siya sa Japan?" Shannon asked while she ate a piece of skin from the lechon in our Christmas table.

Tumango ako at hindi na makanguya.

Shannon sighed. "Ako ang kinukulit ni Rex tungkol sayo, Nona. Wala naman akong ibang masabi. It's getting annoying, you know."

I don't know why Rex became like that. He wasn't like that before. Ngayon, halos hindi ko siya gustong makita pa man.

"Just block him or whatever."

"Hinaharang ako sa gate para magtanong tungkol sayo, Winona. Ewan ko ba kung ano ang pjnakain mo doon. He's just so crazy about you. Ganoon ba nangyayari sa mga nagiging lalaki mo?"

Tumawa ako ng kaunti. "He's my only ex, how could you say that?"

"'Yong hapon din, ah."

"What? He's not crazy about me."

"Really? It's obvious that you're lying to him and yet he still gives you an Hermes shoe? Sinong baliw?"

Hinampas ko ng kaunti ang hita ni Shannon. "I'm not lying to him anymore."

Hilaw na tumawa ang pinsan ko. "So, ano? Kunyari ibre-break mo siya? Paano? Hahanap ka ng dahilan?"

Sandali akong tumahimik.

"I'm not breaking up with him."

Nagkatinginan kami ni Shan. Her mouth dropped.

She laughed loudly. Napatingin ang mga kamag-anak namin sa amin na parang may loka lokang tumatawa. Si Shannon lamang iyon.

"Don't tell..."

Pumikit ako. "Stop it."

"You fell for him, didn't you?" she said, unbelievably. "Nahulog ka sa sarili mong patibong. And what happens if he knew you were lying to him all this time?"

Hindi ko iyon napag-isipan.

I bit my lips. "He won't know."

Shannon sighed and looked at me like I was about to do another thing that I'm not sure of. And she's right.

Kabanata 23

"Advance congratulations, Felix. Do we have to attend your campaign? Mukhang sure win ka naman na..." one of my Tito said to Dad.

Dad laughed. "It's too early to tell, kuya. Pwede pa magbago ang isip ng mga tao."

"But are you topping the surveys?"

Daddy looked at me and smiled. "I wouldn't be able to get there without my daughter's help."

Tito laughed. "Nagmana nga sayo 'yan, Felix. If she wants to achieve something, she'd do whatever she can."

"I know," Dad laughed.

Nanlamig ako.

It's too late to feel this. I looked at Dad while he smiled because of the praises he received. How can he be happy knowing that the only thing that puts him there is because of someone's downfall?

But I'm no different. I put him there. I helped him.

I wanted my father's approval so bad. I wanted to help him win. Hindi iyon masama, ang akala ko. Why would it be a bad thing if I'm helping the community know who they will vote for? That's what I thought.

But now, it feels different.

Akiro had been neglected. His parents' marriage is broken. And I never felt bad. Instead, I used it to bring his family down.

I am worse than my father.

Akiro stood in front of my door while he was holding a bouquet of flowers in his hands. Kakarating niya lamang galing sa pasko niya sa Japan. Kasabay noon, kababalik lamang ni Daddy sa Baguio para mag-asikaso.

He kissed my temple. Wala siyang dalang mga damit. Siguro dahil babalik din naman siya sa Japan para sa New Year.

"Flowers?" I asked and sniffed the red roses. Nilapag ko iyon sa counter top.

"My pretty girl deserves pretty flowers, too," he whispered.

Uminit ang pisngi ko.

I ditched Shannon's invitation because Akiro will be here. I didn't really tell her that Kiro's here because I know she will be bugging me all day.

I calmly looked at Akiro while he prepared something in the kitchen. At the back of my head, I thought of telling him the truth. But I couldn't. Hindi ko alam ang mangyayari. It felt good and I don't want to spoil it. I

don't want to break it.

Inangat ko ang ulo ko habang nakadapa sa kama. I peeked at Akiro who stood up. He opened a pack of cigarette and grabbed one stick. Hinagis niya iyon sa bedside table ko.

He noticed me being awake. Huminto siya. He removed the cigarette from his mouth to kiss me.

"Can't sleep..." he whispered.

I groaned a bit. I watched him plaster a smirk on his lips as he walked to the veranda. Walang suot na pang-itaas at tanging boxers lang.

Uminit ang pisngi ko. Ever since we did it for the first time, we never did it again. I mean, hindi naman sa nagrereklamo ako.

I grabbed the pack of his cigarettes and a ballpen beside it. May ngisi sa labi ko habang pinaglalaruan iyon. He smokes sometimes when he can't sleep. Pampa-antok niya iyon, sabi niya. But I don't like it.

So, I wrote silly things on the remaining stick of his cigarette.

Nope.

Stop smoking.

Win says no.

I smiled and put it back.

Bumalik si Akiro nang maubos ang isang stick. He went back for another. Huminto siya nang makita niya iyon na nakasulat. He raised his eyebrow. I giggled.

Binaba niya iyon.

He chuckled and lay beside me. His hands crawled on my stomach to hug me. Ngumisi ako.

"My baby doesn't like me smoking?" he whispered in my ear.

Ngumuso ako. "Well, I don't want to be a secondhand smoker, Kiro."

"Alright."

Ganoon lang kadali?

Kumunot ang noo ko. "Mahirap naman itigil 'yon."

"Hindi mahirap kung gugustuhin..."

I pouted.

Nilingon ko si Akiro. The view of him sleeping on my bed scratches something in my brain. Bumaba ang tingin ko sa itim na boxers niya. May naninipa doon. Kahit na ayaw kong tignan, siya itong nanghihila sa akin.

"Eyes up here, Winona..." natatawang sabi niya.

I groaned. "Let's just sleep!"

Tumalikod ako sa kaniya. He hugged me from behind while still laughing.

"Hindi naman masama kung ikaw mag-aaya," he whispered. "Pagbibigyan naman kita..."

"Akiro!"

"Alright..." he gave up and laughed.

I didn't know how the days after Christmas and before New Year became more fun than the actual holidays. Akiro stayed in my condo for five days. It was like living together. He cooks and cleans. He feeds me three times a day. He makes sure I get all the protein I need.

My eyes widened when I saw Shannon outside my condo. She smiled at me and showed me a bottle of El Hombre. I almost pushed her away. Hindi ko na nagawa iyon dahil sumungaw si Akiro na walang damit.

Shannon's mouth dropped.

Pinandilatan ko ng mata si Shannon. She looked confused. Kulang na lamang ay sampalin ko siya para matauhan.

"This is Shannon, my cousin..." I said.

Akiro nodded politely. "Nice to meet you."

I looked at how Shannon's eyes widened more as she checked out Akiro's topless body. Kagagaling lang kasi namin sa department store dahil wala na siyang damit. He's only wearing his pants with a Calvin Klein brief showing.

"Ah, hi! Hello! I'm Shannon... or Shan! Winona's cousin. Yes, ako nga..."

Pumasok si Akiro sa loob. He was preparing sushi as he promised me this morning. Bumalik siya doon habang ako naman ay tinulak si Shannon sa sala.

She pulled my hair.

"Aray!" iritado kong sabi. "Ano ba?"

"This is why you keep ditching our meet-ups!" sabi niya. "Kinakalampag ka na pala rito!"

Namilog ang mata ko. I pushed her down the sofa. "Keep your fucking mouth shut, Shan!"

"E, ikaw naman kasi! Dito na ba siya nakatira? Ano 'yan? Live in na kayo?"

"Ofcourse not!" iling ko. "Kababalik niya lang noong pagkatapos ng pasko. Tapos babalik ulit sa Japan sa New Year."

"Huh? Ano 'yon, ginagawa niyang kapitbahay ang Pilipinas?"

"Anyway, he's leaving tomorrow."

Nanliit ang mga mata niya. "Imposibleng hindi kayo nag-sex dito."

"Shannon!"

"Bakit? You resist that guy? My god, Winona. Hindi kasi masyadong maliwanag sa bar noon, eh. You didn't tell me he's hotter than any man I ever knew!"

Humalukipkip ako. "Sakto lang naman..."

"Sakto lang? The man's like a walking Webtoon character!" she exaggerated. "Ganiyan ba ang taga-bundok, Winona Jean?"

Nilingon ko si Akiro. He's indeed everything that Shannon said. The good thing is that I think he doesn't know it himself. Hindi niya alam na ganoon siya ka-guwapo. If he were like these boys in Manila, he would treat girls like a fucking charity case.

Akiro sat beside me and placed the platter of sushi on the coffee table. Shannon got three glasses for the tequila she bought. Nakangising aso siyang sumisimsim habang pinapanood kami.

"So, Akiro, right?" Shannon asked. "Do you have any single friends?"

Umikot ang mata ko. "Shan..."

"What? I'm single and I plan on going to Baguio next year. Baka lang may available na kaibigan ang boyfriend mo," she said and emphasized the last word.

"Allen's single," Akiro said and looked at me.

Nagbikit ako ng balikat. "I don't really think they vibe together—"

"Bakit naman hindi?" Shannon butted in. "I'm very compatible with any guy, Win. I adjust, you know."

Nanliit ang paningin ko sa kaniya.

Tinikman ko ang sushi na ginawa ni Akiro. He watched me carefully. Tumango ako at ngumiti sa kaniya nang masarapan doon. He licked his lips na para bang natakam siya. Hindi ko alam kung sa sushi o sa iba...

"This is really good!" Shannon said. "I actually don't see Winona to like Japanese food."

Matalim kong tinignan ang pinsan ko. She smiled at me. Punong puno ang bibig niya ng sushi.

"I'll be making her a lot, then," Akiro said to me.

"Naku, Akiro, you're spoiling her. Mukhang magtatagal nga kayo nitong pinsan ko!" she smiled.

Umikot ang mata ko. "Are you drunk already?"

"Ofcourse not," nilingon niya si Akiro. "I'm just so happy. Alam mo, iba kasi 'yong ex ni Winona, si Rex. You've met him. Hindi ako kinakausap 'non dati, pero noong naghiwalay sila ni Win, ako na laging

binubulabog!"

"Just block her already, Shan."

"I did block him. Kung bakit ba kasi kung kailan wala na kayo, tsaka siya patay na patay sayo. I mean, no offense, Akiro."

Akiro raised a glass to her. Tinignan ko ang baso ni Shannon. She already has five drinks and almost all the sushi. Mukhang hindi na muna ito uuwi.

"Just saying, h'wag mo na pakawalan itong pinsan ko. I'd hate her to go back to that cheating son of a bitch."

Akiro nodded. "I don't really plan to."

Napa-inom tuloy ako. Wow.

Shannon was really loud and talkative. Ganiyan kapag nalalasing na. Naubos na ang bote ng tequila na dala niya, na siya din ang naka-ubos. I watched her close her eyes in the middle of her sentence.

Akiro stood up. "I'll sleep on the couch so your cousin can sleep on the bed."

"Huh? Why?" sabi ko. "Shannon can sleep here."

He chuckled. "It's fine."

Pinagtulungan namin buhatin si Shannon papunta sa kwarto. Akiro grabbed a pillow and a blanket somewhere. Pinanood ko siyang lumabas nang patayin ko na ang ilaw.

Humiga ako sa kama. I closed my eyes. Si Akiro din siguro ang nagligpit sa mga pinag-kainan sa baba. He probably also washed the dishes.

Damn it. I can't sleep here.

Tumayo ako. I was wearing my dress pajama as I went downstairs.

Akiro was already done with his chores. He changed into his sweatpants. Naka-upo sa sofa habang nakatingin sa cellphone niya. His eyes lifted when he saw someone on the stairs. Kinagat ko ang labi ko.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I walked towards him.

"I can't sleep there..."

His lips curved into a ghost smile. He pulled my hand until I sat on his lap. The lights were dim. Nakasindi pa kasi ang TV pero naka-mute na iyon.

"You can sleep here," he whispered and kissed my shoulder.

Ngumuso ako. "You'll leave tomorrow, right?"

"For New Year's Day, baby. I'll be home after."

"Then, we'll be seeing each other in Baguio?"

He rested his hand on my thighs as he played with the rim of my dress. "Uh hmm. What's the matter, baby?"

Tinignan ko siya. "Well, it's almost the election and our internship. We'll both gonna be busy, Akiro."

Namamangha niya akong tinignan. May kaunting ngisi sa labi niya.

"You're seriously saying that to me?" he asked if it were a ridiculous matter.

"Why not? I'm used that we see each other fondly now. Tapos hindi na magiging ganoon."

"Nothing stopped me from seeing you today. Not even my family," he said. "So, don't ever question my time for you."

I smiled a bit. I planted a silly soft kiss on his lips. Pinanood niya ako. Nagbatuhan kami ng halik. It started softly until he kissed me deeply.

I felt his hands crawling the insides of my dress. I'm wearing a thong inside. His fingers touched me underneath the thong. Parang automatic ang hita ko na bumukas para lamang sa kaniya. I hampered a bit.

"Shh," he whispered.

He kissed my neck. Naramdaman ko ang marahas na paglihis ni Akiro sa panty ko. He's touching me. He drew circles on my sensitive part. Humigpit ang hawak ko sa balikat niya.

"Kiro, oh my god..." I covered my mouth.

"How does it feel, hmm, baby?" Nakangising tanong niya.

Oh, damn.

I bit my lips. "Good."

He inserted his finger. Napa-iktad ako dahil doon. He groaned. A soft moan escaped from my lips as he moved his fingers inside me. He stopped.

He watched me as I protested about him stopping.

"Why did you stop?" I asked.

"I want to kiss you there," he whispered.

Hindi pa ako, um-oo pero hinagis na niya ako sa sofa. He crouched as he placed both of my legs on his shoulders. My eyes rolled back in my head as he kissed me on that spot.

I grabbed his hair. "Damn it, Kiro..."

He sucked me and played me with his tongue. I moaned harder when he inserted his tongue inside me. Hindi ko na alam kung saan ako kakapit. Sa sofa ba o sa kaniya! I was going crazy.

"I'm going to..." I whispered desperately.

He bit his lips. "On my mouth, Winona."

I pushed his chest a bit out of embarrassment. Nainis siya doon. He hugged both of my hips.

"I said on my fucking mouth, Winona."

Fuck!

I watched him devour me. I was still shaking when he stood up. He licked his finger and had a devilishly smirk on his lips. Like he did something he was very proud of.

Gosh, I am so in love with him.

Kabanata 24

I smiled when I saw Akiro's message.

kiroayasaki: Already in Baguio. Can't wait to see you.

kiroayasaki: Bought you something. :))

kiroayasaki: Did Dheia send u the invites to Allen's party?

Paalis pa lamang ako pauwi sa Baguio. Shannon was supposed to say her goodbyes but she's kind of running late so I'm waiting for her outside her house para lamang magpaalam siya sa akin.

jeanwinona : Yes. It's his birthday ba? I should bring something, then.

jeanwinona : I'll pick up something for you, too.

kiroayasaki : Don't bother. Just come home safe.

Shannon pouted as she saw me outside. Para siyang batang tumakbo sa akin para yumakap. Umikot ang mata ko at bahagyang nagreklamo sa ginawa niyang yakap.

"Call me more often," she said. "Also good luck with you and that Japanese hottie."

I smiled. "Thanks, Shan. Visit me in Baguio if you can."

"I will!" she said and pouted more. "Just call me if anything happens, okay?"

I hugged her tight.

Pahirapan pang umalis dahil nagmumuryot si Shannon. Sa tingin ko naman ay nasulit namin ni Shannon ang pagkikita namin. Well, it's not like how we hangout before but I spent enough time with her this holiday.

I picked up a gift for Allen kahit sa sabado pa lang ang birthday niya. Sa Manila lang kasi ako makakabili ng gusto ko kaya sinulit ko na. It's a similar perfume that he wears. I think he wears Tom Ford so I bought him one. I tried picking something for Akiro but I couldn't think of anything.

Naabutan ko si Daddy sa bahay nang makauwi ako. He greeted me with a kiss and had me prepared some foods. Kumalam kaagad ang sikmura ko.

"How's the traffic?" he asked me.

"It's okay," sabi ko. "Traffic dahil peak season na ulit."

He nodded. "Do you have plans before your internship? I talked to the clinic you want so you don't have to worry about it."

Ngumiti ako. "Thanks, Dad. Well, birthday party ng isang friend ko sa weekend. I bought him a gift although I'm thinking of getting Akiro, too..."

Nilingon niya ako nang magbanggit ako ng pangalan. I carefully sliced a piece of meat on my plate. Hindi ko alam kung pagsisisihan kong binanggit iyon.

Dad smiled at me. "What would you give him, hija?"

"Hindi ko pa alam, Dad. It's casual so I want some casual gift. Like a bag? But he doesn't wear a bag every day naman."

"What about wallets?" Dad suggested. "It's a casual gift. And purposeful."

Wallets?

Ngumuso ako. "That can do."

"If you want, I can source you a good brand. Of course, you would want to give him a nice quality. Hindi ba? I know a friend from Manila, who can deliver it here."

I sipped on my water. "Really, Dad?"

"Yes," he smiled. "I'll have it wrapped."

"Thank you, Dad. I just want to give him something since he's been really great to me..." I bit my lips. Bakit may iba akong iniisip?

"Of course, Winona."

Tumango ako.

I had to admit that Dad may have been different since he started running for this election. He had been really passionate. Passionate about trying to win. Hindi ko alam kung matatakot ako doon o hindi.

Sometimes, the scariest person is a person who is really desperate to get somewhere.

I picked a red halter dress for Allen's birthday. Dala dala ko iyong regalo ko sa kaniya. I put my hair in a bun and did light makeup. I threw a cardigan on my arms in case I felt cold.

Nakita ko ang puting paperbag sa lamesa namin. It was my gift for Akiro. I peeked a little bit and saw the wallet I'm gifting. Naka-ribbon pa iyon.

I smiled as I wrote something on the card.

Love, Winona. It says.

"Take care, Winona," I jumped when I saw Dad coming from his office. It's almost seven in the evening.

Tumango ako. "I'll be home after midnight."

"Okay," he said. "Make sure Akiro tries your gift out. Maybe don't bring up that I picked it."

I laughed a bit. "Fine, Dad. Goodnight..." I went up and kissed my father before leaving.

I felt excited while driving to Allen's party. Akiro told me that he'd pick me up but I wanted to hide my gift

so I insisted that I drive. Wala naman na siya nagawa dahil nagmaneho na ako bago pa man ako mag-text na paalis na.

I arrived in the party at the exact time. Maraming sasakyan na nakaparada sa labas ng gated house ni Allen. Hindi ko na kailangan maghanap dahil iyon lang ang pinaka-maingay na bahay na nakita ko.

"Win!" Dhiea ran to hug me.

I tapped her back. "Thank you for sending the invites."

"Thank you for coming! Syempre, we won't forget you," she smiled.

"Where are the others?"

Nakasukbit ang kamay niya sa braso ko habang hinihila ako sa mga kaibigan niya. I saw Allen talking to a girl. Nang makita ako ay binukas niya ang dalawang kamay niya upang sumalubong. Ngunit sumingit kaagad si Akiro at nilihis ang direksyon ni Allen.

Allen glared at him. "Birthday ko naman, pre, eh."

"Kahit pa graduation mo," Akiro said and walked towards me.

He snaked his arms around me and kissed my temple. Naramdaman ko ang tingin ng ibang kaibigan niya. I realized, wala silang dalang boyfriend or girlfriend most of the time. Although I know Juan is engaged with someone. Riley's crying over someone and Klaus is... well, no one knows what's going on with him anyway.

Other than that, everyone's single!

"Happy birthday!" I gave my gift to Allen.

Ngumisi siya. "Hindi na sana, Win—" sinilip niya ang regalo ko. "Wow! Tom Ford! Bigatin ka talaga!"

I smiled. Naupo kami sa maluwang na lamesa. Nakita ko ang videoke na regalo raw ni Riley kay Allen. Tumayo si Dheia para magpindot ng numero doon.

"Mahiya naman 'yong nagregalo sa akin ng baso d'yan..."

"Totoo nga kasi, uminom 'don si Lebron James kaya niregalo ko sayo..." Jackie said and laughed.

"Gago! Souvenir lang 'yon sa binyag!"

Akiro kept on looking at me. Tinikom ko ang bibig ko. Tumayo ako at nagbalak umihi. Sumunod si Akiro sa akin na para bang may invisible na tali siya na hawak ko.

Sa loob ng bahay ang restroom nila Allen kaya doon ako dumiretso. I looked at Akiro who was greeted by someone outside. Napahinto siya doon pero nanatili pa din ang tingin sa akin. I entered the restroom and did my business.

Noong lumabas ako ay nakahintay na sa akin si Akiro. With his bored stare and grim lips. Parang laging naiinis.

I took the moment to give him my gift. I handed out my gift to him while we were away for a moment.

Mataman niya iyong tinignan. Umangat ang kilay niya.

"Merry Christmas and Happy New Year?" natatawa kong sabi.

"Tss," he smirked and opened my gift.

Umangat pa lalo ang kilay niya. Umikot ang mata ko. It's like he's not pleased. Not the gift but the thought of me buying him something.

Pinanood kong alisin niya ang ribbon at ibulsa niya iyon. Lumaki lalo ang ngiti ko.

"Alright, you don't have to buy me anything next time."

"Bakit?"

"I don't like it..."

"'Yong regalo ko?"

He shook his head. "I like to buy you everything. That's my job. Bigay mo na sa akin 'yon."

I bit my lips. "Well, you've been spending a lot on me. Plane tickets and such. I wanted to give you something."

"You already gave me something," he whispered.

Uminit ang pisngi ko nang maintindihan ko. I pushed his chest a little bit. He grabbed my hand and pulled out something from his other pocket. A small cloth pouch from his jacket. It was embroidered in deep red thread, old but cared for, like someone had kept it safe for years.

"What is this..." I stared at it in my hand.

"It belonged to my grandmother," he said. His voice wasn’t dramatic, just steady. "In my family, the eldest son gives this only to the woman he’s sure about."

My mouth parted.

I cleared my throat. "An heirloom?"

"I want you to have it before you meet them. So they know I already chose."

"Akiro..." I swallowed hard. "This is too much."

"I want you to keep it," he whispered. "You're the only one I'd bring home."

I tiptoed and kissed him. He smiled as he pulled me to kiss me deeply. Kung hindi pa umubo si Riley ay hindi kami titigil. Riley covered his eyes. I pushed Akiro away. Bahagya akong nahiya.

"Tang ina, sorry."

Matalim ang tingin ni Akiro sa kaibigan.

"Sibat na'ko," tumatawa si Riley. "Hinay hinay, pre. Hindi 'yan ang pulutan."

Umalis na si Riley. Akala ko ay titigil na kami pero hinila muli ni Akiro ang baywang ko. Tila walang pakialam sa kaibigan niya.

"Bumalik na tayo doon," I widened my eyes at him.

He bit his lips. "Saglit lang, mahal."

"Akiro..."

"Fine," he sighed like a kid.

We went back to our table.

Naabutan namin ang mga kaibigan niya na nagkakantahan na doon. Nakadukdok na si Riley sa lamesa habang kumakanta si Allen ng December Avenues. His friends were laughing about his broken tone.

"Tang inang boses 'yan. Sarap pasukan ng basuka ang lalamunan ni Allen," Jackie said.

Dheia placed a glass in front of me. "Ikot mo na."

"Dito na kami matulog, Allen, ha. Gusto ko ng lugaw sa brrakfast."

"D'yan ka sa labas ng gate matulog, sakto dumadaan d'yan 'yong naglulugaw."

Dheia laughed.

"Lasing na si Dheia. Tawagan niyo na kuya niya para sunduin."

"Gago. Ano ba siya? Teenager? May curfew?"

Dheia rolled her eyes. "Don't fucking call him, Jackie!"

Akiro watched me as I drowned myself in the tequila. I sipped a bit of lime because of the bitterness.

Allen's party was loud and fun. Everyone has a shot of alcohol in their hands. Ang iba ay lasing at umuwi na. Ang iba ay balak yatang hanggang umaga rito. I was a bit drowned by the alcohol myself but I am pretty tough.

But everything shifted.

Tumunog ang huni ng police car sa labas. Nataranta ang iilan. Allen stood up, irritated because two men entered his house. Policemen.

"Akiro Ayasaki," one of them called.

Tumuwid ako ng upo. Akiro relaxedly looked at them. He wasn't even nervous or anything.

"We need to speak with you. Step forward, please."

I stood up when Akiro did. His friends started to get worried. I saw Riley get up his head. Dheia held my hand, nervously.

"What's happening?" I asked.

Dheia shook her head. She doesn't know.

"What’s this about?" he asked, careful, steady.

"We just need you to cooperate," the taller officer said. "We have reason to believe you’re in possession of illegal substances."

What?

Tumawa si Allen. Napakalas iyon. "Gago, prank ba 'to? Prank to, pre?"

Wala nag-abalang sumagot sa kaniya. His laugh faded when he realized it was serious. I looked at Akiro. He lifted his eyebrow. He wasn't nervous. How can he not be?

"I think there's a misunderstanding. I don't do drugs."

"We'll check your belongings," the officer said.

He raised his hand and boredly turned around as the cop touched his body and pockets. Sa kaliwang bulsa, nakapa ang wallet. They pulled it out and opened it.

Two pockets of drugs.

From the wallet I gifted him.

My heart dropped.

It's Dad.

Akiro shot his eyes on the drugs in front of him. Then, he glanced at me. His jaw clicked.

"Akiro..." Dheia whispered.

Riley pushed the officer. "That's not his wallet."

My nails were digging into my skin. Nangilid ang luha ko. I felt Dheia's hand on my arm, gripping it tight like she was feeling what I was feeling, too. But we're different.

"Can you confirm this?" the officer asked Akiro.

Akiro licked his lips. He looked at me. A tear dropped in my eye.

He nodded. "It's mine."

No. No!

Jackie stood up. "That's not his. He's not doing drugs. We're his friends—"

"Put your hands behind your back," sabi ng isang officer.

Nagkagulo ang lahat. Hawak na ng mga pulis si Akiro habang dinadala sa sasakyan nila. I panicked.

"No! No, wait!" I screamed but it was drowned by the panic of his friends. "Akiro!"

I tried stepping closer, but someone’s arm blocked me. I didn’t even see who. The crowd had instinctively built a wall around the scene, half-morbid curiosity, half-fear, and I was trapped outside it.

Tears ran down my face.

Akiro didn’t resist. He didn’t even flinch when they grabbed his wrists.

He just looked around, lost for a second then found me through the gaps of the crowd.

His eyes.

God. I’ll never forget how they looked.

He turned away again, and the officers pushed him through the door, the echo of it slamming shut drowning out the last trace of him.

And that was the last time I saw him.

Akiro never came back. Not to me. Not to anyone. Not in the way that he was once.

Kabanata 25

I adjusted my seat as I started writing something on my board. The patient in front of me just had her divorce. She grabbed a box of tissues I prepared as she sobbed.

Over the years, I've watched people fall apart in the chair across from me. I've seen tears slide down faces that tried so hard to look composed.

Most of my patients deal with heartbreak. They tell their stories to me, how they met, issues, and red flags they wish they hadn't ignored. Ilang beses ko na iyong narinig. And I never get tired of it.

I felt amazed. Not in a romantic way. More in a… clinical, human way. Like observing something powerful enough to override logic, routine, even self-preservation.

I would watch them cry. Grown adults who handled jobs, families, responsibilities and I realized how strong love must be to dismantle someone like that.

And yet, despite all the pain they describe, despite how badly they were hurt, most of them still end the session with something like:

"I just wanted to be loved back."

or

"I still hope I'll meet someone who won't do that to me."

It's strange. People lose so much because of love, but they never stop wanting it.

Naisip ko... love must be something incredibly strong if it can pull people this far, and still make them willing to try again.

"Ikaw ba, doc, have you ever felt like that?" my client asked me.

I smiled. "This session is all about you, Didrei."

"Yes, but I need something to understand me."

"I do understand you, Didrei," I sighed. "I want to help you that's why you need to tell me exactly how you feel, alright? There is nothing I like to do than to understand you."

I've been doing good in my job. My clinic is just located a few blocks from my condominium. Work has kept me busy. I love my work and it has been the only thing that evolves around me right now.

Other doctors and patients praised me for my effectiveness. Patients end our session with either a smile on their faces or a huge realization.

"Sorry, I'm late," I sighed and sat in a coffee shop. "My patient requested more time."

"It's okay," Rex smiled at me.

I sat infront of him. He already food for me. Nangalahati na ang inumin niya kaya nahulaan kong na-late

nga ako o mexyo napaaga siya.

"How's work?"

I sipped on my mixed berry fruit tea. "Fine. I can't discuss my patient with you, Rex. You know that."

Tumawa siya. "I was just wondering if you're tired or what. You told me Shannon's exhibit is in five. Baka lang pagod ka at hindi na tayo tutuloy."

"I'm good, Rex. And it's not an exhibit this time. She's hosting a charity art auction."

Shannon's love for art is something. She has hosted a lot of exhibits in the past. She had become one of Makati's youngest gallery directors, running a space that represented some of the most promising contemporary painters. Tonight was her big night because of the charity art auction she curated herself.

I dressed properly. A black glittery dress and a black stilettos to pair. My auburn hair was tied properly in a ponytail.

Rex wore his casual business suit. He looked pretty washed up. Well, his business is kind of paying off. Kaya naman kung pumorma ay talagang nakaayon.

"Nona!" Shannon came up to hug me. Bumeso siya kay Rex na kasama ko.

I smiled. "Just so you know, I'm here to support you. Not bidding anything."

"Ewan ko sayo! Thanks for coming, anyway," nilingon niya si Rex. "What's this? Kayo na ba ulit?"

Rex smiled. Hinampas ko ng clutch ko ang dibdib ni Rex.

"No."

"Ouch..." Rex jokingly held his heart.

"Well, it's not normal when you two are together. And this is not the first time I've seen you two." Shannon raised her eyebrow.

"We're friends!"

"Sigurado ka?" she faced Rex. "I can tell by your suit, Rex, that you're really bidding high tonight."

"If Winona likes something, then..."

Shannon clapped. "Talaga, ha!"

I rolled my eyes.

Collectors, businessmen, and socialites filled the hall, glasses clinking. Everyone seemed expensive. Just the room that fits me. Shannon found us a perfect seat. Not in front but not exactly at the back. Just enough to see the painting and the people, as well.

Tumuwid ako ng upo. Rex grabbed me a glass of champagne as the introduction and everything started. I clapped with the people. As if bibili naman ako.

I don't have that much interest in art. I mean, it's pretty if it's pretty, you know. I don't really look for meanings. Nandoon 'yan kung nandoon. If it's pleasing then, I'd buy.

I didn't really understand much from the announcer. Sumimsim lamang ako ng champagne.

Maya maya pa ay umugong ang bulungan. Businessmen whispered like someone important had just walked into a boardroom.

"Is he?" someone in front of us said. "Asaki Global Ventures, right?"

The gentleman nodded. "The one expanding in Southeast Asia. They just bought three logistics companies in Malaysia and Vietnam."

"They’re planning to build a regional headquarters in Osaka and Manila," another added. "My boss has been trying to get a meeting for months."

"He’s young for what he’s achieved. Twenty-eight and already outperforming established corporations."

"I heard Asaki Global is entering the Philippine tech sector next year," one man murmured. "If he wants your company, he’ll swallow it whole."

"Or save it," another said. "Depends on what he wants."

"I also heard he's a doctor himself."

A man entered. All black. His hair was perfectly gelled if he had prepared just to be here. His suit shaped his rock-built body. He towered over everyone like he didn't even see them.

The whispers followed him like a shadow.

And I sat there, frozen.

Akiro Ayasaki sat in a seat, a few meters away from him. His jaw tickled as he adjusted his tie. Medyo kumunot pa ang ulo sa kaunting inis. His thin eyes flared at the stage like he was annoyed that it was late to begin.

I swallowed the whole champagne in my glass. Kahit siguro ang baso ay lalamunin ko. Lamunin niyo ako!

"You okay?" Rex whispered.

I nodded. Ngumisi ako. Kulang nalang mapanis na kaagad ang ngisi ko.

I tried to calm. Bumaling ako sa stage nang magsimula na. I looked at my phone for the time. I wanted to leave. Ilang oras ba ito? Okay na siguro, nakita naman na ako ni Shannon. I can leave now.

A large canvas by one of Shannon’s featured artists, deep blues layered with silver streaks, like weather shifting on a coastline.

I don't have a good eye for art but that one was pretty solid. Rex looked at me for my reaction because I was amused for a second.

"You like it?" he asked.

Umiling ako. "Maganda lang..."

The auctioneer started. "Bidding begins at ninety thousand pesos."

Rex raised his paddle. "One hundred."

People looked at him. Nanlamig ako sa kinauupuan ko nang magtama kami ng tingin ni Akiro. He looked at me, not even turning his head. Not surprised. Like he knew I was here.

His eyes were cold and grim. Hindi ko makilala. Hindi ko kilala.

I sighed. "Rex, you don't—"

Another paddle was raised.

"One-fifty," Akiro Ayasaki said.

Rex blinked, almost amused. "Alright…" he raised his paddle again. "Two hundred."

Halos ipukpok ko kay Rex ang paddle niya. I know he's goddamn rich but I cannot imagine buying a painting that much!

I thought Akiro was done. Pero hindi. He raised his paddle and boredly looked at the announcer.

"Three hundred."

Three fucking what?

Rex blinked. Hindi niya rin inaasahan na lalaban pa siya doon. He looked at me, still not recognizing Akiro. Well, I wouldn't doubt it. The first time they met was the last, too. And Akiro did a pretty damage to his eye!

Rex raised his paddle, irritated. "Three-fifty," Rex said.

Akiro didn’t hesitate. "Five hundred."

Everyone started to look. No one moved for a second. I felt my heart climbing in my throat.

Nilingon ko si Shannon sa gilid na hawak hawak ang bibig niya. She was muttering something. Probably recognizing who that Japanese jerk is. Ako naman ay halos inuuntog na ang ulo sa lamesa.

"Rex, hindi na..." sabi ko.

Kumunot ang noo niya. He raised his paddle, not listening to me. "Five hundred fifty."

With no hesitation, Akiro raised his paddle. He looked at me this time, coldly. Almost a warning.

"One million," he spoke.

Everyone gasped. Even me.

The auctioneer couldn't even talk. Naramdaman kong umakyat ang ininom ko. I couldn't breathe.

Rex chuckled without humor. "Okay, I'm not going to war over a painting." he gave up.

Of course, he is!

"Going once, going twice..." the auctioneer began to count. "Sold to the Japanese gentleman!"

I stood up.

Nilingon ako ni Rex. My eyes were stuck to Akiro who didn't even realize that he just spent a million on a painting. Of course, he didn't. He didn't just spend a million on a stupid painting. He wanted something. He wanted to make me feel something.

Losing.

I left the hall and my hand climbed on my chest. I felt it again. I felt him. A feeling like he never left. Like I never healed.

Funny how I help people heal themselves when I couldn't even heal myself.

Kabanata 26

I framed Akiro.

Lying to him wasn't enough. I needed to drag him down. I needed to ruin him.

I still remember how he looked at me when the authorities took him. It replayed in my head multiple times in my sleep or even when I'm awake. Para akong sinasaksak paulit ulit. I couldn't breathe. It was a thorn stuck in my throat.

I remembered how I entered my father's room after they took Akiro. My hands were shaking and tears dried on my cheek. I pushed his office, harshly.

I never disrespected my father. I respected him, fully. I never raised my tone with him. I was obedient. I did what he wanted. Even if it was out of my morals.

Tumingin ako sa pamilyar na wallet na nasa lamesa ni Daddy. He looked at me as he stood up. He felt that I was angry— no, I was in rage. Kumuyom ang palad ko at kinuha ang pitaka.

"Where did you get this, Dad?"

He adjusted his glasses. "It was evidence. The police gave it back after a few investigations."

"Bakit nila ibibigay sayo?" tumaas ang tono ko. "Did the police know that you framed Akiro? Is that why they never found out that I was the one who gave him that?"

"Akiro didn't tell them it was from you."

He breathed heavily. He looked at me coldly. He was different. I barely knew my Dad. I felt like seeing someone I hadn’t spent my whole life with, too.

I cried more when he didn't deny or even answer. I covered my mouth with my palm. My father is a monster.

"Why did you do that?" I cried out loud. "You used me! You used my gift to frame him, Dad! You planted drugs in this. You destroyed Akiro just to ruin his father’s chances. You did it because you’re desperate!"

His eyes flashed with anger at me, not at what he had done.

"Do you have any idea what’s at stake?!" he roared. "Do you think elections are won by being soft? By letting the opposing candidate parade a perfect little family while—"

"You ruined Akiro instead?" I cut in, voice shaking with fury. "You ruined someone who did nothing to you!"

"I will not lose this election, Winona. Not to that man. Not after everything I sacrificed. And if one boy has to fall to make sure this family survives, then so be it!"

My mouth hung. Umiling ako. I'm trying to deny that this monster is my father.

Dad laughed a bit. "Why are you surprised? You used him, too, Winona."

"It's different," pumiyok ang boses ko. "I didn't want to do that. He was important to me, Dad—"

"How is it different?" he asked. "Don’t tell me you actually care about him. That boy was just using you to get leverage."

Pumadyak ako. "Stop lying! You didn’t ruin his father. You ruined him. And he didn’t even fight back because he thought I did it. He thought I betrayed him."

Dad looked away, jaw flexing with a mix of guilt and stubbornness.

That was worse than any confession.

"You didn't even care if I went to jail for giving that wallet to Akiro."

"I knew he wouldn't tell that it was from you."

"How can you tell?"

He eyed me. "I know a fool in love when I see one, Winona."

"You’re destroying everything around you because you’re terrified of losing," it was a realization.

"I cannot lose, Winona!"

The desperation in his eyes was raw, ugly.

It was the look of a man who had crossed too many lines to turn back.

I stepped away from him, slowly, like I was backing away from a stranger.

"You already lost," I said. "You just don’t know it yet."

And as I walked out of the room, Dad didn’t call after me.
He just stood there, breathing hard, fists clenched like the madness of winning had swallowed whatever part of him used to be a father.

I used to think anger had a limit. That once you reached it, it would spill over and fade. But as days passed, mine didn’t fade. It calcified.

The news of Akiro spread like wildfire in the city of Pines. Everyone hated his family. Everyone saw them differently. A wealthy Japanese family with an addict son who makes them addicts, too. His father withdrew from the election. The last thing I was told is that they bailed Akiro out and flew to Japan.

Life continued but mine stopped.

I called Akiro. A thousand times. Thousands of messages. He never responded. All of the numbers I used were blocked. His accounts were deleted. Like he never existed at all.

In school, the air was different without Akiro. Everyone was busy with an internship. No one asked what happened but everyone knew. The professor knew. Darleen knew more than anyone else in this class.

She stood up in front of me with anger packed in her hands. Her palm landed on my cheek the moment people were gone. I held my cheek after it got numb for a second.

I didn't fight back. Not that I had any power to even shout.

"You..." she angrily said. "You did this to Akiro."

Tumayo ako. I grabbed my bag. Mabilis niya iyon hinila. I watched as my things got scattered to the ground.

"You did this for your father to win!" she said. "Ano? Hindi ka magsasalita? Fight back, Lopez! Fight me like you always did. Hindi ba dapat matapang ka na ngayon? Anak ka na ng mayor!"

I swallowed hard. Lumuhod ako para pulutin ang mga gamit ko. Darleen was even more frustrated when I didn’t answer her. She kicked my things. She kicked my iPad. I watched how the screen got scratched.

I grabbed my things and packed them in my bag. Tumayo muli ako.

"You're not saying anything because it's true, isn't it?"

Darleen stopped when she saw me sobbing. Kumunot ang noo niya. I pushed her and ran away.

She didn't chase me. For the first time, it didn't matter if Darleen won over me. It didn’t matter if she hurt me. Nothing else matters.

Everything she said was true. I carry my father's name and I'm starting to be terrified. I am the Mayor's daughter now. My father rules the city just as what he wanted. I was scared. Not for me. But for the city.

"Dheia," I called Dheia when I was passing down SLU after my duty in my internship.

She saw me. I clearly saw that she did. Pero hindi siya tumigil. Hindi siya lumingon.

"Dheia!" I shouted and ran.

She stopped. Mahigpit ang hawak niya sa bag niya at nilingon ako. I bit my lips.

"Winona," she said, casually.

I swallowed. "I wonder if... You have news about Akiro."

Kumunot ng kaunti ang noo niya. Hindi sa tanong ko. Kung hindi sa naisip kong itanong sa kaniya.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, I don't know. Excuse me," nilagpasan niya ako.

"Dheia, please!" I almost begged.

She stopped. She hesitated pero lumingon siya sa akin.

"Winona, I don't mean to be rude or anything. But I know Akiro and he doesn't do what everyone is saying he does. And I know that what happened to our friend has something to do with your father."

Her eyes didn’t soften. She wasn’t comforting me. She wasn’t angry either. She was stating facts like she had waited for me to understand on my own, but I never did.

I swallowed. "I had nothing to do with it. I also believe that Akiro would never do such a thing."

"Are you sure you don't have anything to do with the information leaked about his family, too?"

I couldn't talk.

"Everything sparked when you two were together," she said. "I don't like pointing fingers but... You probably understand, right?"

Dheia inhaled slowly. Hindi galit. Hindi rin nagtataka. She looked… tired. Alam kong matalino si Dheia, pero that moment proved she saw more than I ever realized.

"I'm sorry. This isn’t something you can fix with apologies." She paused, then added, "Or with guilt. Akiro left. He doesn't want you to look for him anymore."

My heart collapsed.

"And Winona…" she added, stepping around me, "I don't, either."

Dheia looked away for the first time, as if seeing my pain hurt her too but not enough to reach for me.

She walked away without looking back.

Her words hit harder than any slap.

The city felt different the moment I decided to leave. Every corner had a memory I didn’t want anymore. Every street felt like a reminder of the people I lost, the trust that broke, and the truth na hindi ko na mababago kahit anong pagsisisi ko.

As I dragged my suitcase across the living room, I caught a glimpse of my father from the corner of my eye. Sitting in his study, door half-open, light spilling into the hallway.

He was on the phone again, planning policies, discussing appointments, and talking about the responsibilities of the position he won.

Won. What an ironic word.

He didn’t win. He took. He took a reputation.

I waited for guilt to hit him. Some crack in his voice, a hesitation in his step, anything that showed he felt even an ounce of regret. But there was nothing. My father was built from ambition and polished by the approval of strangers.

I wanted a fresh start. I wanted to be free of the city that suffocates me now. This was the last time I let my father's choices define mine.

He may have won the election but lost his daughter. And that won't mean anything to him. Ever again.

Kabanata 27

"A million pesos on a painting!" Shannon exclaimed on a call. "It's the highest bid I got! And he paid full that night, too!"

Hinilot ko ang sentido ko.

Tulala ako habang nasa opisina. This was my biggest nightmare. I have always believed he was gone. That I won't ever see him again. I believed that. I lived with that.

Everything happened in the past flashed before my eyes. Nilingon ko ang anti-depressants pill sa cabinet ko. It was all empty. I couldn't throw it away. I wanted to stare at it sometimes. I was struggling before. I had that whole bottle like a vitamin, like an escape. It did work. Or so, I just believed.

Noong umalis si Akiro, wala na sa isip ko na makikita ko ulit siya. I left the city of Pines along with him. Kinalimutan ko ang lahat. I started a new life.

My father finished his four-year term like a hero.

That’s what everyone kept calling him... a hero, a good man, the man who saved the city. It was like the entire city was wrapped around the version of him he wanted them to see.

And when the next election came, of course they voted for him again.

Overwhelmingly.

Sometimes I’d watch him on TV giving speeches, smiling like he had carried the whole city on his back. And the crowd would cheer. They adored him. They trusted him. They believed in everything he said.

Shannon called me twice. "Are you worried? Bakit? Sa tingin mo, gagantihan ka niya ngayon?"

I adjusted my seat. Tumikhim ako. "No..."

"Sigurado ka? Kung ako man, matatakot ako! Napakayaman niya pala. Even those huge businessmen I know were bowing to him that night! Doctor din siya!"

"What are you trying to say, Shannon?"

"Do you think he forgot what happened before?" Her voice wasn't asking. "His family had to go abroad after he was arrested, 'diba? And he's back. Ano ang balak niya? Magbakasyon? Business? I don't think so."

Hindi ko alam kung maiinis ako kay Shannon. Napa-ayos ako ng upo. I don't know why I'm bothered by it! But she's right.

"I had nothing to do with why he was arrested. Bakit ako matatakot?"

"Does he know that? The only thing he knows is you lied to him and betrayed him," Shannon said. "And even if you told him that you didn't, maniniwala pa ba sa iyo 'yon?"

"Well, what do you suggest?" sarkastiko kong tanong. "Mag-impake at tumakbo?"

"Baka naman umuwi kasi hindi maka-move on sayo..."

Tumawa ako. "I lied to his face, Shannon. The only thing he wants is to suffocate me."

"Sabagay..." Shannon laughed. "Atleast add some security there nalang. Baka mamaya, may makita kang hapon na pumupuslit d'yan. Baka ikaw naman, bumukaka ka pa."

"Shan!"

"We both saw him, Winona Jean! Tao ba iyon? Straight from a fucking anime! You had the chance. I can't believe you didn't fuck him before."

Sinapo ko ang noo ko. Hindi ako nagsalita.

"I... I need to prepare," tumikhim ako. "May pasyente ako mamaya."

"Fine! Get some securities, Winona!"

I dropped the call.

Kinapa ko ang puso ko.

I witnessed love in my office almost every single day. I listened to women who were trying to save marriages they knew were broken. I sat with men who admitted, for the first time, that they were terrified to be alone. I watched couples cry over years of miscommunication, and individuals who were finally learning to let go.

Some fell in love again. Some were in the middle of trying. Some walked in already healed.

I could break down someone else's patterns with ease. I could explain attachment styles, trauma responses, and the way the brain protects itself after a breakup. But when I tried applying it to myself, nothing fit.

Except when it came to me.

Because whenever I thought about my own heart, it was like someone paused it and forgot to press play. I just stayed still.

Bumaba ako sa condo ko at naabutan ko si Rex doon. He crashed my condo last night. He had a late meeting and he was drunk. Malayo pa ang bahay niya kaya dito siya tumuloy.

When I was too heartbroken and moved to Manila, Rex took a long time to apologize to me. I never wanted anything to do with him at first. I never forgot how he cheated on me, even now.

Hindi naman ako tanga.

It's just that I saw how sincere his apologies were. And it's all just friendship. After all, Rex is a good person except for the cheating part. And he's been paying for what he did to me until now. As friends, ofcourse.

I made it clear that friendship is the only thing I could offer. Mukha namang malinaw sa kaniya iyon.

"Morning, sunshine..." he said.

I rolled my eyes. "Kaya ka hindi nagkaka-girlfriend kasi iniisip nila, tayong dalawa pa din."

Humalakhak siya habang sinusuot ang damit niya. "Ayaw mo ba?"

"Rex, go home."

"Hatid kita," Rex said. "Coding ng sasakyan mo ngayon, 'diba?"

"Fine. Just drop me off lang. I have a patient later."

"Bakit ba tinatago mo ako sa mga pasyente mo?"

Hinampas ko ng supot ng tinapay ang dibdib niya. "And I'm late!"

I never tried to get into a relationship. Una, dahil wala akong oras. Work had been my whole life now. It had been my priority. Shannon said that I'd lose my days. I don't know what she's talking about. I'm living my life.

Hinatid ako ni Rex sa clinic ko. He parked his car beside a navy blue Bentley. It was parked in front of my clinic. Malagkit ang tingin ni Rex doon. He whistled.

"Iyan ba ang pasyente mo? Bigatin, ah? DPWH?" he joked.

Tumawa ako ng kaunti. Bumaba ako sa sasakyan. Bumaba din si Rex para lamang pagmasdan ang sasakyan na nakaparada doon.

I glared at him. "Go home."

He smirked. "Sunduin kita mamaya?"

"No, thank you. I'll take a grab."

"Sus, ayaw pa..." tumawa siya. "Sige, see you later, sweetheart."

Umirap ako at tumalikod.

I glanced at the Bentley. Umangat ang kilay ko. Is this really a client?

I entered the clinic. My secretary usually opens the clinic before I do. Most of the time, I let patients wait in the lobby for me. But there was no one. Except for a huge box standing on a wall.

I looked at my secretary who was waiting for me to notice it. She smiled at me.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Painting daw po, ma'am."

Kumunot ako. "Painting? Is this from Shannon?"

Umiling siya. She bit her lips. "Hindi ko po sigurado, ma'am. Pero pangalan niyo kasi ang sinabi."

Tumaas ang kilay ko. She was holding a folder. I saw a familiar logo of Shannon's gallery. I sighed. Sa isip ko ay ibinebenta lamang iyon ni Shannon sa akin. I grabbed the folder in her hand.

Nilabas ko ang iilang papel na nakita ko.

Certificate of Authenticity with Shannon’s signature. Auction sales receipt with the buyer’s name printed clearly.

Akiro Ayasaki

Final Bid: 1 Million Pesos
Artwork: “Stillness,” Oil on Canvas.

There was a note with it.

8 PM. Dinner with me.
- A

My hand shook.

Nalaglag ang papel na hawak ko. My eyes widened. Nataranta ang sekretarya ko at pinulot niya ang mga papel.

With my panic, I grabbed the box and opened it with my shaking hand. Bumulagta sa akin ang parehong painting na nakita ko sa auction. My eyes couldn't believe it.

It was the same. A painting of a coastline with blue and gold streaks. Stillness was its name however the painting wasn't still. It looked like moving because of the wind. Yet, it did feel... still.

Without any reason, I looked at the Bentley parked in front of my clinic. The glass window was clear. Umandar ang sasakyan at dahan dahang umalis pagkatapos ko mabasa ang mensahe.

Nanlamig ako.

It's his turn.

Kabanata 28

My mind was occupied. Even when I'm talking to my patients, all I can think of is the damn painting in my office that is now unpacked. A million pesos painting is staring right at me like a reminder.

It's a beautiful art. Pero kahit anong meaning sa likod ng painting na 'yan, si Akiro ang nakikita ko.

"That's a beautiful painting," my patient said. "Sorry, I'm just mesmerized."

Hindi ko din alam.

Tumikhim ako. "Well, it's a milion dollar painting. It should be beautiful, Didrei."

"Ah," tumawa siya.

I tried to find a way to connect it to her session. "Every painting has a meaning behind it, Didrei. If you would put a meaning behind this, what do you think it is?"

She paused for a while and started to think. I took the time to sip on my tea and glance at the time. It's almost 6 in the evening. I have to be out of hete before 8 PM.

"I think the painting represents a memory," she said. "Not clear but the details are precise. A memory that replays in your head multiple times that's why it looked shaky and windy. It's a memory."

I looked at the same painting. I held on my pen tighter. Pinutol ko ang tension sa pagitan namin ng litrato. I wrote something on her board to ease my mind.

"A memory that keeps repeating even when you don’t fully understand why it stayed..." lumambot ang boses ko. "Sometimes, the mind doesn’t replay something because we want to remember it. It replays it because we never really understood what it did to us."

Didrei stared at me like she understood what I said. The ink on my paper stained because I harshly stabs it with my pen. Suminghap ako at nilingon ang pasyente ko.

"Even if it's painful?" Didrei asked.

"People don’t struggle with the past because it’s painful. They struggle because it interrupts the present. It makes you feel things you thought you’d outgrown," I said.

Didrei stared at the abyss. I found myself staring at it, too.

Great. Therapy session ko din pala ito.

Our session ended. My secretary was waiting for me to leave because she will lock the clinic up. Nagmamadali kong kinuha ang bag ko. I didn't even had the time to retouch my makeup. Gusto ko na umuwi!

Dinner, his face.

Why does he think that I will eat dinner with him? Why do I also think that he would actually want to eat dinner with me? I bet he's poisoning me. He's drugging me or something.

"Sam, I'm leaving. Lock up... early," my voice toned down when I saw a man standing in my clinic lobby.

Nagkatinginan kami ni Akiro.

He was wearing a white long-sleeved polo that is folded up until his elbow and a black pants. He's standing infront of my certifications on the wall, along with my awards and recognitions. Nakahalukipkip at naka-igting ang panga niya.

I looked for Sam, my secretary. She was nowhere. Wala na ang mga gamit niya at nakaayos na ang desk. She left?

"Our reservation's in 8," Akiro spoke.

Sa lakas ng tibok ng puso ko, pwede na itong maalis sa dibdib ko. Now that I'm looking at him, hearing him, I question myself if this was real. Nasanay akong makita soya lamang sa panaginip ko. And it's a nightmare.

"Hindi ako sasama sayo." I marched towards the door. Mabilis siyang humarang sa harapan ko.

He towered me. Tumingala ako sa kaniya. I realized that he was taller than usual. I mean, what the heck, five years. The only thing that hadn't change about him was his perfume.

He clicked his jaw. "My letter was clear. I didn't ask you."

Bumilis ang paghinga ko. "What do you want?"

He stared at my eyes. There's anger in his eyes, I could sense it. It's scary because I couldn't remember this look in his eyes before. He really changed. I can't even feel that this is him. This isn’t Akiro.

"I want to have dinner with my girlfriend."

Halos mapigtas ang pasensya ko.

Hindi ako nakapagsalita. I was too caught up by the way he called me.

He chuckled on what he said. "Right. I forgot that you don't follow scripts anymore."

Umawang ang labi ko. "What?"

"Scripts," he even repeated like I was some dumb. "You know, the ones you used to run on me back then. Should I ask what are the lines today? Or are we improvising?"

My knees weaken. He smirked without humor. Humigpit ang hawak ko sa shoulder bag ko.

Umiwas ako ng tingin. "I think you need to leave."

His smirk faded. He walked towards me. "Get in my car. We'll go to dinner."

It was a command. Binuksan niya ang pintuan ko at nilingon ako. Wala akong kawala. He looked at me like he was going to set a fire on my clinic once I refuse. So I didn't have a choice but to get in his car.

Nangilid ang luha ko habang pumapasok sa sasakyan niya. It was the blue Bentley that I saw this

morning. I wasn't wrong about that.

Akiro entered his car. Pinalis ko ang nangingilid na luha sa mata ko bago pa man niya makita. I looked at the window and didn't bother to even recognize him.

I didn't talk to Akiro the whole ride. He was silent, too. Tahimik lamang ako hanggang sa iparada niya ang sasakyan niya sa isang mamahaling Japanese restaurant. I watched him walk out.

I didn't wait for him to open my door. Soon as I opened it, I started running.

Tumakbo ako.

Wala akong pakialam kung nagmukha akong tanga o snatcher. Before I even got to stop a taxi, I felt a hand on my stomach. Tumili ako. I was lifted up.

"Holdaper! Help! Snatcher! Adik!" I shouted. I realized that the last thing I said was kind of offending for him.

People looked at me like I was crazy. Pumadyak ako. I kicked his knee. He muttered a curse. Sinuntok ko ang kamay niyang nakayakap sa tiyan ko para buhatin ako ng walang kahirap hirap.

"Damn it!" binaba niya ako sa gilid ng sasakyan niya.

Hiningal ako.

Matalim ko siyang tinignan. "Let me fucking go!"

He clenched his jaw. I saw the real anger in his eyes. Kulang na lamang ay umusok ang ilong niya.

"Why? Scared?" he licked his lips. "You think I'd plant you something?"

Kumurap ako. I pushed his chest. "You think you can just show up after five years and what? Drag me to dinner?"

"Nakakalimutan mo yata. I'm your boyfriend, right?" he whispered. "You started that fucking lie, Winona. Now, you live with it."

Nanghina ako. What the heck. What in the world is he saying? Tinitigan ko siyang maayos kung lasing o ano. But he's serious. Just mad. Rage.

He wasn't here for anything but revenge.

This wasn’t about us. This was about winning. About getting even. About making me feel what he felt.

Akiro wanted me to hurt the way he did. The way I made him. He wanted me to pay.

And that realization hurt worse than anything he ever said.

"Are we going to have dinner or do I have to carry you inside myself?"

Fuck you. Fuck you so much.

Kabanata 29

"I want the most expensive you can offer," I said to the waiter. "I also want champagne. I have a very expensive taste so bring me your best."

Akiro looked at me. Gumuhit ang ngisi sa labi niya. Kumunot ng kaunti ang noo ko. Ofcourse, hindi siya mamumubi d'yan. I bet that he doesn't even bother to check our bill after.

Akiro returned the menu to the waiter. "Onaji no de onegaishimasu."

What did he say?

The waiter politely nodded. He understood what he said. I didn't.

"What did you say?"

He licked his lips. "I told him I want the same thing."

Humalukipkip ako.

I couldn't talk to Akiro while waiting for the food. Inabala ko ang sarili ko sa cellphone ko. I know it's disrespectful but there is nothing respectful between us now.

The food arrived. I watched how the kind water placed our food neatly. Ngumiti ako. Tipid ang ngiti sa akin pero malawak kay Akiro. They probably saw what happened outside their restaurant a while ago.

Bumuntong hininga ako. This won't do. I stared at Akiro. If I were his therapist right now, I'd lose my mind with all of these.

He's angry, obviously. Shoulders stiff, jaw locked, eyes sharp enough to cut me in half. But beneath all that rage… there's something else. Something messier. His voice is controlled, too controlled, the kind of calm that only comes from holding everything in until it starts to shake beneath the surface.

He's not here because he wants closure. He's not here because he’s over it.

He's here because he's hurt, and hurt people don't show up to talk. They show up to win.

His wound apparently still has my name on it.

I sighed. "Akiro, I know you're doing this because of the past. And I'm sorry about what happened between us. You didn't deserve it."

Akiro shot his eyes at me. Umangat ang kilay niya. His lips curled into a smirk that turned into a heartless laugh. He laughed like I was talking some nonsense.

"Are you reading me right now?"

"I know you want to take revenge on me for doing what I did but understand that—"

"Winona," he stopped me. "I'm a doctor, too. And I know how to structure a revenge if I wanted one. If you think I came here because of some immature revenge fantasy, you should get your license

checked."

Whoa, what the hell?

"I just want to say that I'm sorry," It took a bottle of pills to say that.

He clicked his jaw. Malamig ang mga mata niya sa akin. Halos hindi tumagos sa kaniya ang sinabi ko.

"Finish your food," he coldly said. "I don't want another lie coming out of your fucking mouth."

Hindi ko maintindihan. I know he thinks I'm a big fat liar. As much as I wanted to put the blame on my father, the mastermind, I lied to him still. I was the one who gave him access to do that Akiro. He wouldn't be able to plant those drugs without me.

I know he was imprisoned for weeks until his parents bailed him out. I never visited him. Not even once.

I was scared. I was scared that he would shut me out. I was scared that he would curse me. Kahit saang anggulo tignan, I was the reason why he was put behind bars. I would he mad at myself, too.

My phone rang while we're in the middle of eating. It was Rex. Hindi ako nagdalawang isip na sagutin iyon kahit na kaharap ko si Akiro.

"Yes, Rex?" medyo malakas na sabi ko.

I saw Akiro loosening the button of his polo shirt and shifting on his seat.

"Sarado na clinic mo," Rex said. "Nasaan ka ba? Dadaanan sana kita."

I licked my lips. "Yes, maaga umuwi si Sam kanina. I'm just picking up something at the grocery store. Are you cooking dinner tonight?"

Naisip ko, maybe if he knew I had a boyfriend, he would leave me alone.

"Huh? Uuwi na ako."

"You really know my favorite," I giggled. "I can't wait to go home now."

"Lasing ka ba, Winona?"

Tumawa ako. Nahinto lamang iyon nang agawin ni Akiro ang cellphone ko. He ended the call and placed my phone on his table.

He eyed me darkly. "Table manners."

I eyed him unbelievably.

I didn't finish my very expensive meal. Nanghihinayang ako pero si Akiro, mukhang walang pakialam basta kumain siya ng maayos. I watched how he gave out a black card to the waiter. I had a peek at his wallet and saw a couple of black cards.

Tumikhim ako.

Wala man lang ako kahit isa. How rich is he?

Sumunod ako kay Akiro habang palabas siya. It was already late. I was actually expecting that he'd take me home. Wala din akong makitang taxi na dumadaan na. My phone is almost dead to book a ride.

I was about to enter his car when he looked at me. He raised his eyebrow.

"Get a cab or something," he said.

Umawang ang labi ko. Seriously? Hindi na ako nakapagsalita dahil pumasok na siya sa sasakyan niya.

What the heck?

I watched his car drive away. I had no choice but to wait for a taxi to pass by even if it was the most impossible thing right now. Twenty minutes akong naghintay doon hanggang sa hinintuan ako mismo ng taxi.

Pinuno ko ng mura si Akiro sa ulo ko. Padabog akong pumasok sa taxi. Kumuyom ang palad ko. I feel used even if we only had dinner.

Nahagip ng mata ko ang side mirror. Nakabuntot sa amin ang asul na Bentley. The car was too flashy not to notice. I took a deep sigh.

Shannon couldn't stop laughing when I told him what happened. I always stop by her studio in my free time. She has her own studio where she paints and displays her artworks. She has a lot.

Shannon doesn't call herself a full-time painter. Painting is just her side hobby but her main career is working in the art world. Even that, she had already sold three of her paintings to millionaires.

"For someone na super galit sa'yo, he really went out of his way to sit with you for an hour and eat food," she snorted quietly.

Matalim ko siyang tinignan. "He just wanted me to see how rich he got, Shan."

"He gave you a million-peso painting, Winona Jean." she raised his eyebrow. "Hindi galit iyon! Namimiss ka niya!"

"After everything I did to him, I didn't think he even wanted to see me. I put that man in jail. Walang kamiss-miss doon!"

"What do you think he wants from you, then?" she said as she mixed colors on her palette. "Malaki, panigurado. He's already spending millions. What else does he want? Lamang loob mo?"

Hinilot ko ang sentido ko. "I'll probably consider having security around me now."

Shannon laughed. I looked at the large face portrait that she was painting. Babae iyon. Tumaas ang kilay ko. Hindi pa tapos pero sinisimulan na niya kumulay sa buhok. Familiar auburn hair.

"That's me!" turo ko sa painting.

"Kanina mo pa ako dinadaldal, wala na akong maisip!" she said. "Would you mind posing?"

Shannon and I laughed it out.

Inabala ko ang sarili ko sa trabaho. I talked to my secretary, too. I told him that she will not let anyone inside unless it's my patient. Tango lamang at ngiti ang binigay sa akin ni Sam.

I was in my office all day even without patients. I just read an email that I was invited to attend the PAP annual convention. It's where a room of psychologists and doctors attends to listen or to talk.

Kumatok si Sam habang binabasa ko iyon.

"Yes?"

Sumungaw ang ulo niya. "Pasyente, Doc."

Umangat ang kilay ko. "Wala na akong pasyente ngayon."

"Uh... bago po, Doc. Wala po sa appointment today. Walk-in."

Bumuga ako ng hininga. "Where's his file?" sabi ko. Pumasok siya at nilapag ang informations na pinapasulat ko before I accept patients.

Pangalan pa lamang ay halos ibalibag ko na ang papel. Kahit hindi ko maintindihan ang hapon na sulat ay parang nabasa ko na iyon.

It has a list of his personal information. Bilog ang mata ko habang binabasa iyon.

Name: ???? ???

Age: 28 years old

Sex: If the doctor is available.

Address: Forbes Park, Makati City

Reason for seeking therapy: Got lied to, manipulated, and framed for drugs.

Anything else the therapist should know: Clear your schedule on weekends. Weekends are mine.

My secretary looked at me confusedly. She was nervous.

"Doc?"

Binagsak ko ang folder sa mesa ko. "Let him in."

Kabanata 30

After leaving Baguio, Dad had been contacting me. He wanted me to go back to Baguio and work there instead. We only got ourselves, he said. His words didn't struck me at all. I felt nothing.

Daddy begged me to come home. He would visit me in Manila, he would visit my clinic before. No one in our family know what happened between us aside from Shannon, of course. Dad never told his brothers, I didn't, too. I was too ashamed.

I was ashamed that I was included in his sick plans. I was ashamed of myself.

My father had talked to me, begged me. But other than that, he was never sorry. He never apoligized for the pain he caused. He was never guilty. Ako ang sumalo ng pagsisi. I half guilted over what happened to Akiro. It was all me.

And now, I'm taking the blame.

I watched Akiro seat infront of me. I crumpled a piece of tissue. I held it like my ego, my pride that is being stepped down.

"I see you've read my informations," he calmly said. "Especially the last one."

The dinner. Ofcourse, he wants another dinner with me. Para ano? Para pagtripan na naman ako?

Nakade-kwatro ang paa at nakahalukipkip. He looked pretty decent and well as a patient. There was a thick glass between us. He felt so far. So different.

Humugot ako ng malalim na hininga. "I'm declining you as my patient. You should find another doctor."

His eyebrow raised. "You can't do that."

"Yes, I can," madiin na sabi ko.

He stood up. Pinanood ko siyang magmartsa papunta sa lamesa ko. Bahagya akong nagpanic. He placed his hands on my table. Nakatukod doon ang dalawang kamay niya habang nakatingin sa akin na naka-upo pa din sa swivel chair ko.

I stood straight.

"I believe you are very familiar with my reasons why I want this therapy, doctor," he whispered.

Umiwas ako ng tingin. "Well, I said I'm sorry. What else do you want, Akiro? You want to hurt me?"

He poked his inner cheek with his tongue. His stare was stuck on me. Nakatitig siya na para bang gusto niyang tusukin ang dalawang mata kong nakatingin sa kaniya ng masama.

"You think your sorry is enough for all the things I've been through because of you?" he asked. "I was behind bars, Winona."

Tumayo ako at nagtangkang umalis pero humarang siya sa daan ko. His tall massive body was towering me like a wall.

My heart started to bounce rapidly. I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want to hear his suffering because of me. I spent a long time trying to erase it.

"Akiro, please—"

"I was behind bars and you didn't even bother showing up."

I stopped.

What?

Umangat ang tingin ko kay Akiro ngayon. His lips parted. His eyes were looking at me with danger. He clenched his jaw tight.

"Was that all a fucking lie?" Akiro almost whispered. "Did you rehearse your words with your father, huh? Did you have to memorize a script? Sabihin mo sa akin."

Tinulak ko ang dibdib niya. Nangilid ang luha ko. "I said, stop it!"

He grabbed my wrist. He held it tight. Hindi masakit pero madiin ang hawak niya sa akin.

"You really used those night as part of your scheme, hmm? You were ready to spread your legs if it helped your lie."

My hand flew on his face.

Umigting ang panga ni Akiro at hinaplos ang pisngi niya. A tear dropped from my eyes. Nilingon niya ako. He watched me tear up because of his accusation. My lips shaked.

He stepped back. "Either way, I was a fool."

Akiro left me crying in my clinic.

My hands were shaking as I look for a bottle of anti-depressant pills that I was hiding. I didn't mind taking two of them just to stop the weight of pain burying me right now.

Akiro didn't have to pay me with that session. But he did, anyway. He asked for my digits and he transferred me larger cash. Alam kong mayaman siya pero sa ginagawa niya ay para lamang siyang nagtatapon ng pera.

I wore a red dress and a black coat on top of it to the PAP annual convention. It's a formal event and I didn't want to show up with a lot of skin because I will be meeting a lot of doctors.

I really wanted to attend this so I was happy when I got invited. Dadalhin ko din sana ang sekretarya ko pero wala kasing nakalagay doon kung pwedeng magdala. It would be fun for her to meet other doctors, too.

I smiled at the familiar faces I saw. Some of my professors was there, too.

"Doctor Lopez," someone called. "Wow! So glad we met here again. Remember me?"

Nilingon ko ang matangkad na lalaking lumapit sa akin. He's familiar but I can't put names on him. He

laughed when he realized that I was clueless of his existence.

"Clark," he said. "Review center?"

"Oh!" I shaked his hands. "Yeah, I remember."

He smiled wide. "I teach psychology in UP now. I remember you always said that you wanted a clinic. Ngayon, naririnig ko na ang tungkol sa clinic mo. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Clark," I softly tap his hands, still holding mine. "Congratulations, too. We really lost connections after exams but I'm really happy to see you here."

"A dinner tomorrow doesn't hurt your schedule, I hope..." tumawa siya.

I paused and think of anything on my schedule tomorrow. Mukhang wala naman.

Tumango ako. "Sure! I'll get your number!"

Clark and I sat down together. He's warm and friendly. I could really use some friend to talk to because all I can see is professional doctors and psychologist that are way ahead of me. It's kind of embarrassing and overwhelming.

"For our next speaker, we have a licensed psychologist and the CEO of a rapidly growing tech company known for its innovative solutions and expanding presence across Asia," the host introduced.

Tumuwid ako ng upo. I grabbed a champagne from somewhere. I sipped on it.

"Doctor Akiro Ayasaki of Asaki Global Ventures."

Naibuga ko ang nainom ko.

I coughed.

Clark panicked as he grabbed a handkerchief from his coat. Kinuha ko iyon at pinunas sa bibig ko. My eyes was on the stage.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked me.

Akiro wasn't smiling. Matalim ang tingin niya sa akin agad nang makarating siya sa stage. For some reason, he was annoyed.

He was wearing a black coat and black pants. He combed his haid backwards. I heard murmurs. Mostly from the women here. Ngumingiti ang iba. Others know his name. Others were curious.

"Thank you for having me today," he spoke clear and precise. "Most of my work today revolves around running Asaki Global Ventures. We’re a tech company, so my day-to-day life looks very different from a clinical psychologist’s routine. I don’t hold sessions, I don’t run clinics, and I don’t spend my days analyzing case notes."

Akiro always had a bright brain. Back when we were in college, even he if doesn't make it obvious, I know he's much more smarter than me. He spent most of his time in bar or drinking and I spent mine studying but he was alwaus ahead of me.

I was really insecure of that. And I think he knows it. Kaya minsan, nagpapaubaya siya. He saves me a lot on recitations, quizzes, even on our thesis. He never acknowledged it. He didn't want me to think that I was dumber.

"And that’s what I hope you take away from this today. Whatever direction you choose, inside or outside the traditional field, your training has value. It stays with you. It changes the way you think. And it gives you an edge that other industries rarely get. Thank you."

Everyone clapped.

Tumayo ako dahil medyo nabasa ang dress ko sa champagne. I leaned to Clark to whisper something. He nodded as I turned my back.

I caught Akiro looking at me at the stage. Sinundan niya ako ng tingin hanggang sa comfort room.

Tinitigan ko ang mukha ko sa malaking salamin. I cursed as I went and dried my skirt. Inamoy ko iyon at amoy alak. Ngumiwi ako.

Damn it. I should leave.

Bumukas ang pintuan. Hindi ko iyon pinansin dahil abala ako sa damit ko. Not until I sniffed a familiar perfume.

"What are you doing here?" I looked at Kiro who was at the door.

He walked towards me and started releasing his tie. He removed his coat and placed it near the sink. He started folding his sleeves up on his elbow. Umatras ako. Takot na lumapit.

I pulled out his phone. Itinaas niya iyon. The scene was so familiar that I couldn't breathe.

He wants my number.

Umirap ako at umiiling iling na naglakad paalis. Hinuli niya ang kamay ko at hinila ako sa harapan niya. His eyes bore on the wet part of my dress. He clicked his jaw.

"You changed your number," he said. "Put your new one here."

Matalim ko siyang tinignan. "Why would I give you my number?"

"So that I'll know your whereabouts. I thought you're smart, Winona."

"Hindi mo ako girlfriend."

"Naghiwalay ba tayo?"

Kumunot ang noo ko. "Are you crazy?"

He placed his phone on my hand. "Crazy enough to still come home to my girlfriend who put me in jail."

I grabbed his phone so he could shut up. Humalukipkip siya habang nakasandal sa sink. He wasn't smiling. Sinaksak ko sa dibdib niya pagkatapos.

I watched him type 'baby' on my number.

I swallowed hard.

"Don't go around telling people I'm your girlfriend, Akiro. I have a pretty good reputation here so I don't want it to be ruined."

He licked his lips. Binulsa niya ang cellphone niya. "Scared to shoo away that guy, huh?"

"What guy?"

He tilted his head. "Do you know how hard it was to finish that speech with you distracting me?"

"Ano ba?" tinulak ko ang dibdib niya. "Tapos na tayo, Akiro. It was five years ago. Damn it, you couldn't move on?"

The last words I spoke felt like I hit a spot on him. A very sensitive spot.

"No," he whispered. "I was busy getting angry at you. I couldn't move on."

Kabanata 31

The invitation landed on my desk the same morning I walked into the clinic half-awake and clinging to my coffee. A black envelope, thick paper, gold embossing. One of those things that already feels expensive even before you open it.

The Manila Contemporary Art Gala.

The moment I saw the word 'art', I already knew who it was from. Ngumisi ako.

Your presence is requested.
- Shan :)

I wore a simple bralette top and cream trousers. After the art gala, we planned to celebrate in Xylo. Pinipilit niya akong pumunta dahil naka-display daw ang ilan sa mga arts niya. I wanted to be supportive and I wasn't really busy.

Shannon had a wide smile on her lips when she saw me. She was wearing a coat and black trousers. Shan is a bit taller than me. She could be a model but she was too messy that is why she was never considered.

"Alam mo, ikaw ang lucky charm ko. Nabebenta ko paintings ko kapag nand'yan ka."

I rolled my eyes. "Where are your paintings?"

Lumawak lalo ang ngiti niya. "Mamaya na! Tinext mo ba si Rex?"

Umiling ako. "No, why?"

"Well, I saw him somewhere. I mean, large businessmen are invited but he's not a large businessman. Akala ko in-invite mo."

Tumawa ako. "Why are you surprised that he's invited? Maybe he's part of the list of those... businessmen— wait, businessmen?"

"Yeah, why?"

Luminga linga ako. He's here, isn't he? Every breath I go to, he's there like he installed a fucking GPS on me. Bumuntong hininga ako noong wala akong makitang hapon sa paligid. I am safe.

Shannon walked me to every art. She explained every single one of them. Humalukipkip ako habang naglalakad kami. Every art was a masterpiece, she said, whatever the meaning behind it. Pero may isang art doon na isang guhit lamang. I don't know what explains that.

We stopped at a large face portrait. Auburn hair and she was staring directly like she could pull me inside the painting. She drew my eyes brown like it was a bit under the sun. My lashes were long and my eyebrows were thick and in shape. Naka-awang ng kaunti ang labi ko. Thick and shaped pouty.

I gasped. "Bakit nandito 'yan!" I exclaimed.

She blinked at me innocently. "Hmm? Oh, that? Surprise."

"Shan, ako 'yan!"

"Congratulations," she said, patting my shoulder. "You recognized yourself. Very good."

"You're selling my face!"

"It's art, Nona. People love art. And your face is… well," she eyed the painting proudly, "profitable."

"Profitable? Shannon!"

"Hoy, ang ganda ng pagkakagawa ko! Imagine kung chingenan kita tapos binenta ko. That would've been rude."

"This is already rude! They would put my face on their homes, Shannon!"

"You won't know how many artists asked me about my muse. Kung totoo ba daw 'yan! Your beauty is unreal, Winona. They won't know that's a real person."

"You named me after that painting. Of course, it's a real person."

She shrugged. "At least ngayon, may chance kang mabili ng mayaman."

It's indeed a beautiful portrait but I feel uncomfortable with my face on somebody's home or what.

People started to stare at me. Lumayo ako sa portrait na iyon para hindi mapansin. I started roaming around while Shannon was talking to people about her painting.

May isa pa siyang pininta pero iyon, puro bulaklak lamang. She said it represents her vagina.

"Winona," someone called my name. Lumingon ako at nakitang si Rex iyon.

I smiled. "Hey. I heard you're here."

"I just saw your portrait," he smirked. "I can't locate Shannon but I'm planning on buying it."

Bilog ang mata ko.

"What? Rex, no."

"Why not? Mas gusto mo iba ang bumili noon?"

I sighed. I would be less uncomfortable if Rex bought it. It's just that... Rex and I have been really good friends after our breakup. I know Rex likes me, still. Pero hindi ko na kasi siya gusto.

And having my portrait in his house just makes no sense. I don't want him to think that there's something between us. Isa pa, ang mahal ng painting ni Shannon! She really put a price on my face! I'd hate to think that Rex would spend that much money on me.

"Winona Jean!" Shannon jumped beside me.

She sounded excited. Tumalbog talbog siya habang hinihila ang kamay ko. I laughed a bit.

"What?"

"Someone bought your face!"

Namilog ang mata ko. Kumunot ang noo ni Rex. Before he could talk, Shannon couldn't stop giggling.

"I told you it's three hundred thousand, right? Well, someone else wanted it but this guy talked me out. He will give me a million!"

Nalaglag ang panga ko. Rex was shocked, too.

"Milyon?" Rex blinked.

Shannon nodded. "My first million!"

"Teka," I pushed Shannon away. "Who bought it?"

Doon nawala ang ngiti ng labi niya. Napakamot siya sa ulo niya at lumunok.

My eyes flew to my portrait. I saw a man standing in front of it. Nakapamulsa habang nakatitig sa litrato ko. People noticed him but his eyes didn’t move away from my portrait. It was me for him. It was just me.

I pushed Shannon aside. I started walking towards Akiro. A bit pissed.

He didn't even notice I was there. Huminto ako sa gilid niya. His eyes moved to see me first and then, his head.

"You're not going to buy this portrait," sabi ko.

"Did you paint it?"

"No."

"Then, why are you telling me what to do with this painting?"

"That's me in that painting."

"I know. That's why I'm buying it," he casually said.

Umawang ng kaunti ang labi ko. "I'm not liking the idea of my photo in your house, Akiro."

He chuckled a bit. He raised his eyebrow. "You think I'll do something dirty while staring at your portrait? Don't worry, I don't really need a picture of you to do that."

I gasped. "You're a pig!"

Akiro tilted his head as he caught my eyes. "I don't really like the idea of your face on others' houses, Winona. No one will have this painting unless it's me."

Hindi na ako nakasagot dahil sumabit na ang kamay ni Shannon sa tabi ko. I craned my neck to find Rex but he's already gone. Ofcourse, they didn't really have a great first impression. Ginawang punching bag

ni Akiro ang mukha niya dati.

"Well, I see you've met my muse!" Shan laughed awkwardly.

Akiro slightly nodded his head. "It's a beautiful painting..." he said and glanced at me.

"Thank you," Shannon winked. "Anyway, Win and I are planning on partying after. Since you're buying my painting, why don't I treat you to something, too?"

This bitch.

Treat him? He can buy us both! He can buy the country if he wants to!

He looked at me. "Sure."

Oh, great.

Hindi ako makatakas ngayon dahil hindi ko sila pwedeng iwanan dalawa. I instantly regretted even going here.

Nakabuntot ang sasakyan ni Akiro sa sasakyan ko habang papunta doon. My car looked really small and cheap next to his car. Sometimes I think of everything and wonder if what would happen if things went differently?

Maybe I'm still in Baguio. Maybe my father didn't win. Maybe we're still on good terms. Maybe Akiro's father won, instead. Maybe I was true to my feelings. Maybe I could've admitted that I loved him, truly.

But of course, it's not like that.

"Langya. Ako pa talaga nag-aya para maging third wheel!" Shannon exclaimed as they started bringing drinks to our table.

Siniko ko si Shannon. "We're not together!"

"Why not? You're already forgiven, Winona. A man like that doesn't buy you millions of paintings just to get back at you. Ano 'yon? Ganti niya na magwaldas?"

I didn't talk. I took the first shot of tequila.

I saw Akiro walking towards us. Hinarang siya ng ilang mga tao. I heard them call his name. May mga ibang babae iyon kasama. They all greeted him. Hindi ko na marinig ang usapan nila.

"Winona," Shannon said, tapping her glass against mine, "The man had five years to move on. Five. Years. And what does he do the second he sees you?"

I took a second shot. Bakit hindi makasagot?

I licked my lips. "What I did... was unforgivable."

"What a stupid guy," she said. "I can't believe he still has a thing for you after what you did. I would hate him if he were my friend! Mauubusan ako ng advice sa kaniya, babalik din naman pala siya sa sinungaling niyang ex."

Umangat ang kilay ko. "Who's side are you on?"

She shrugged and laughed. "Hindi na nga nakakulong pero parang hindi pa din nakawala sayo."

Akiro walked toward us. Malagkit ang tingin sa kaniya ng iilang mga babaeng nakakasalubong niya. I felt uneasy because of it.

Pangatlong shot ko na noong maupo si Akiro sa tabi ko. I watched how Shannon's expression shifted. She smirked.

"I remember, Akiro, is your friend still single? What's his name? Allen?"

I pursed my lips. It's been a while since I heard his name.

Akiro chuckled. "I don't think he's in a relationship."

"Really?" Shannon smiled.

"He's busy with work, I guess."

"What does he do?"

"He's a pilot."

Shannon's mouth went round. "You should introduce me!"

Umikot ang mata ko. Allen's a pilot. Wow. I mean, it's really been a long time.

I laughed a bit. "Si Riley?" I asked.

He raised his eyebrow a bit. "He's married and has a kid," medyo irritado siya.

"How about Dheia?" I asked Akiro.

He looked at me. "She's getting married."

"Talaga..." sabi ko.

Tumango siya.

Our last conversation wasn't really great. I remember her soft angry voice. She was hurt. I disappointed his friends. They were my friends, too. The only friends I had that weren't a relative.

But I disappointed them. Just like what I did to Akiro.

"I'm glad you're still friends with them..." I said and sipped on my drink.

Akiro sighed. "They kept in contacts. And Riley's my business partner so I didn't really have a choice."

Tumango ako at uminom muli.

Shannon and Akiro got along really well just like before. She had quite a drink that's why everything's out

of her mouth. Nakainom na din ako at nakakaramdam ng init sa katawan. Akiro didn't touch his drink, either.

He ended up paying for our drinks even though Shannon volunteered to treat him.

Nakaakbay sa akin si Shannon habang paalis kami. Iniwan ko si Akiro doon dahil nagbabayad. I called a Grab for Shannon. I called her home to inform that she's drunk. Hindi ko din kasi sigurado kung maiuuwi ko siya ng maayos.

"Fuck," I cursed as I entered my car. Mali ang pag-upo ko doon dahil sa hilo.

Nagulat ako nang hindi ko maisara ang pintuan dahil nakaharang ang braso ni Akiro doon. I lifted my eyes up and saw him looking down at me.

"Keys," he extended his hand. "I'll drive."

"Hindi ako lasing."

He clenched his jaw. "Do you want to get arrested, Winona?"

Sa inis ko ay binato ko sa kaniya ang susi. I groaned. Gumapang ako sa kabilang upuan para hindi na lumabas. Wala akong pakialam kung nakatuwad akong pinapanood ni Akiro.

He sat in my driver's seat.

I laughed. "Sorry, nagtitipid ako kaya hindi masyadong maganda ang sasakyan ko."

He didn't look at me. I fixed my seatbelt.

"Where's your old car?" he asked.

I closed my eyes. "I sold it. Wala kasi akong pera."

"Why?"

"I was studying," I said. "I had no allowances."

He clenched his jaw. "Why?"

"I cut off my father, that's why," ngumisi ako habang nakapikit. "After you left. I left, too."

"Why..." it was a whisper.

I sighed. "He framed you..." I almost fell asleep. "I was... angry. He shouldn't have done that. That's why I..." left.

I fell into a deep sleep.

Kabanata 32

I woke up with a heavy head in my bed.

My eyes dropped on a white long-sleeved polo shirt I was wearing. Inamoy amoy ko iyon sa taranta ko. It smelled rich, it smelled perfumed, it smelled like Akiro.

My eyes flew to my side table and saw a makeup wipe. The trash can is full of used makeup wipes. At ang tangi kong suot ay damit niya and a panty! Where the heck did my clothes go!

Tang ina, Winona Jean!

I stood up immediately. I panicked. I was drunk. Ilang bote ba ang nainom ko? This is my first time being drunk. I passed out. I don't remember anything after I dialed Shannon's home. Ginulo ko ang buhok ko.

I heard noises downstairs. Minadali kong bumaba. I smelled fresh coffee on the way down. Malakas ang kabog ng puso ko.

"I'll be there within an hour," I heard Akiro's deep voice from the kitchen.

Nakatalikod at hawak hawak ang cellphone sa tenga. He was busy flipping a pancake. Walang suot sa pang-itaas at tanging itim na pantalon. His back flexed a bit as he flipped the pan easily.

My eyes stopped on his other arm which was covered with tattoos. Buong braso niya hanggang siko ay puno ng tattoo. I don't know what was written there but there were so many.

"Leave those on my table," he continued. "I'm just waiting for my girlfriend to wake up. Alright. Thanks." he dropped the call.

He turned his head and saw me. Bahagya akong nahiya. Nakalimutan ko na galit dapat ako kaya nagmartsa ako patungo sa kaniya. I watched him turn off the pan before giving me his full attention.

"Did we have sex?" tanong ko.

His eyebrow raised. "Masakit ba?"

Kumunot ang noo ko. "No..."

"Then, no," he whispered. "If we ever made love last night, you wouldn't be walking right now."

Uminit ang pisngi ko. I remembered the first time we had sex, nilagnat ako! Hindi ko alam na posible pala iyon. It was the worst pain I have ever experienced in my whole life.

"Why am I dressed like this, then?" Iritadong tanong ko. "Hinubaran mo ako!"

He placed the plates on the table. He moved around my kitchen like he knew his way around.

"You puked on yourself," sabi niya. "I didn't really have a choice."

"You could've woken me up?"

"You think I didn't?" tumaas ang kilay niya. "I've seen all of you, Winona. Ngayon ka pa talaga nahihiya?"

"Hindi ako nahihiya!"

He sat on the high stool. Pinanood ko siyang latagan ako ng pagkain. My eyes lingered on his shoulders until his arm which was filled with tattoos. I saw a bunch of crosses, figures, letters, and shades.

I sat on the stool beside him. Now that he mentioned that I puked last night, I kind of feel sticky. Bahagya akong nahiya. Was I too drunk?

Akiro finished a piece of pancake and he's done. He stood up and placed his plate in the sink. Later on, I felt it behind me. Tumuwid ako ng upo.

"We're going to my office later," he said.

I watched his hand on the table and felt his bare back behind mine. I keep on thinking about his sleeve tattoo. Nainitan ako. Why do I feel hot? Is he hot?

Nilingon ko siya habang kagat kagat ang bacon. "What?"

"I told you, weekends are mine," he whispered.

Kumunot ang noo ko. "I have work."

"Already called your secretary," mahinahon niyang sabi. "I cleared your schedule today."

"Why would she follow your orders?"

He sniffed my hair on my ear. "I'm the doctor's boyfriend."

I gritted my teeth. "Hindi ako sasama sayo. You can't just drag me anywhere you want!"

He took a deep sigh. "I have some important things to discuss with you..."

"Wala na tayong pag-uusapan pa."

He chuckled in my ear. "We have a lot... to talk about."

Kinabahan ako doon.

Akiro didn't really give me any choice. I don't think he gives any choices. Parang kapag sinabi niya, sinabi niya. No buts.

He was serious about the weekend thing. Wala naman talaga akong ginagawa usually kapag weekend. I just do some paperwork in my office or hit the gym. Ngunit kahit ano doon ay wala akong mapipili ngayon.

He took my car to the carwash because I puked all over it. Wala akong nagawa kung hindi sumakay sa sasakyan niya. I'm pretty sure he planned all of these.

We arrived in a unfinished building with all of the construction workers and stuff. Maingay nang bumaba ako dahil sa weldings. Iritado si Akiro nang bumaba ako dahil hindi niya ako napagbuksan ng pinto.

A man with a yellow hard hat greeted Akiro. "Good timing. I was just about to send you the new layout."

Tinapik siya ni Akiro. "Hindi ka na yata natutulog, engineer."

The engineer looked at me. Tipid akong ngumiti. Kumunot ang noo niya habang tinititigan ako. Akiro simply raised his eyebrow.

"Ah, sorry. Parang pamilyar kasi," the engineer laughed.

Akiro clenched his jaw. "This is Winona. Girlfriend ko, Edgar."

Engineer Edgar laughed. "Ah, I remember it now. You're the face in the painting."

Matalim kong tinignan si Akiro. He poked his inner cheek and avoided my gaze.

"We'll be in my office," Akiro said to the engineer. "Text me if you need anything. Don't come in."

Nalaglag ang panga ko. Lumawak ang ngisi ng engineer sa sinabi ni Akiro. Ako naman ay padabog na sumunod kay Akiro.

Don't come in! Is he trying to put something on the minds of his employees!

We entered an unfinished looking office. He opened the glass door and waited for me to come in. Doon bumungad sa akin ang pagmumukha kong nakasabit sa dingding niya. Akiro went straight to his desk.

"You put my portrait in your office?" iritado kong sabi.

"It helps keep me working."

Sira ulo ba 'to?

Nagmartsa ako patungo sa mesa niya. I was about to throw my hands and shout at him when he placed a document in front of me.

Lumipad ang tingin ko doon. I wouldn't care for it until I saw my surname on it. My father's name is with my surname.

My eyes lingered on it like a mystery. "What's this?"

Akiro stood up beside me. He opened the folder. It was thick. The first page was a sheet of numbers. Bank logs, deposits, and withdrawals with my father’s name printed on every line. Red circles everywhere. Drugs. Drugs from dealers all over the world.

My mouth hung.

"Kiro..." I whispered. "What's this?"

Akiro didn't talk. I closed the folder angrily. Kumuyom ang palad ko at nilingon si Akiro na puno ng galit.

"You came home for this," I concluded. "You came home to ruin my father like he did to your father, to your family, to your name. This was your revenge!"

He clicked his jaw. "Everything inside that folder is true—"

"No!" sigaw ko. "You're making this up. My father isn't corrupt. He is not dealing drugs!"

Lumayo ako sa kaniya. I saw the fear in his eyes when I started getting away from him. Lumandas ang sakit sa mga mata niya. Nanubig ang mga mata ko.

"How do you think he planted me one?"

Namilog ang mga mata ko. "How do you... know that?"

Akiro sighed. "It doesn't matter..."

He combed his hair backwards like he was stressed because I was. Hindi ko alam kung anong iisipin ko. Hindi ko alam kung anong gagawin ko.

"My father made mistakes," I said, hurtfully. "But he's not this kind of person. You're doing this because of what he did to you. What we did. You're making this up!"

"You think I could make up all those documents, Winona?" malumanay niyang sabi. "He's taking something he doesn't own. He's dealing drugs and using, too. I came back to end what your father started."

I covered my mouth.

"Why are you telling this to me?" mahinang tanong ko. "I lied to you, Akiro. I used you. Why are you trusting me now?"

He held my hand. Pain struck his eyes as he wiped the tears running down my face.

"Trusting you may be the worst thing I'll ever do, yes..." he whispered. "But losing you hurt more than everything else they took from me."

Pumikit ako. I felt my chin lifted. Dumilat ako para lamang makita ang mga mata niyang nangungusap sa akin. He had the same look he used to before. Nakikita ko na ito ngayon. It was the first time I felt like he was real.

"Lie to me," namamaos niyang sabi. "Tell me you missed me, too. Tell me you couldn't move on, no matter how hard you tried. Tell me you loved me. Lie to me, Winona."

Kabanata 33

If I looked back on my life, I would never have thought I would be the daughter of a corrupt politician.

Corruption in this country has always felt like background noise. Something you'd hear on the news, complain about over dinner, then move on because 'ganun talaga.'

But now that it's my own father's name on those reports, it hits different. It's not noise anymore; it's a wound. And I finally see what people mean when they say corruption steals from everyone. Every peso pocketed is a road unfixed, a classroom unfinished, a patient untreated.

Realizing my father contributed to that, I feel both ashamed and angry. Kasi ito 'yung dahilan kung bakit hirap ang bansa. Why people keep losing trust in leaders.

I wanted to believe Akiro. But deep inside me wished that it wasn't true. Because that wasn't how I was raised. That wasn't the man who raised me.

I saw myself driving on a long road in Baguio. Mahigpit ang hawak ko sa manibela habang nagmamaneho. I didn't know if it was the right thing to do. I wanted to know if everything Akiro said was true.

I told Sam that I was taking a rest for a few days, probably a week. Shannon was too busy to even notice that I was away. And Akiro... well, he probably shouldn't know that I left.

I stepped inside our house. It felt different. It felt awful. I remembered the moment I stepped outside the house and never returned.

"Miss Winona," a maid recognized me.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked while my heart was beating loudly.

"Nasa munisipyo po siguro. Hindi po kayo nagsabi na uuwi kayo," she said. "Ipapalinis ko po ba ang kwarto mo?"

I paused.

"Yes," I said.

I never thought I would be back here again. I left because of pain. I came back because of the same thing. But right now, I cannot let it eat me alive.

It was almost dinner when Dad arrived from his business. The maid already told him I was here. Kinain ko ang lahat ng pride ko para lamang magpakita sa kaniya ngayon.

When I saw Dad, I couldn't keep proper eye contact. He smiled when he saw me but questions were written all over his face.

"You didn't tell me you're coming home, hija," he said. "I could've prepared you something nice. Nagdinner ka na?"

I shook my head. "I was planning to have dinner with you, Dad."

Tumawa siya. "Ofcourse. May kaunting kainan sa office pero hindi pa naman ako gaano busog."

People say I got my mother's face but my father's attitude. My mother was soft and gentle. She doesn't talk loudly, she doesn't bend rules and she was the representation of morals. My father was strict, full of authority and he always got what he wanted.

Like me. I had always had that kind of fire within me. I wasn't soft or gentle. I know what I want and I always get it. To think that I'm my father's copy, I'm embarrassed.

"How's your clinic, hija?"

"It's doing great," tipid kong sagot.

He smiled. "Some of my doctor friends recognized your clinic. It's good to hear doctor and our last name together."

I sighed. Hiniwa ko ang meatballs sa plato ko. Dad noticed my silence. Hindi ko kayang makipag-usap sa kaniya na para bang hindi ako umalis sa bahay. I can't act normal knowing what he’s doing. I cannot act normal after everything he had done.

Dad took a deep breath. "Winona, I know these past few years have been rough. I'm just glad you're visiting me here. I missed you, hija."

I gritted my teeth.

I always had a soft spot for family. I always wanted my father's approval. The reason why I was always on top of class, I didn't have bullies, and I wasn't weak. It was because my father was like that, too.

"I'm not here to visit you, Dad."

Napawi ang ngiti ni Daddy.

I dropped my utensils. "I know you're stealing from your people."

Kumunot ang noo ni Daddy. He was surprised, not with my accusation but with how I knew that. Tumawa si Daddy.

"Where did you get this nonsense, hija?"

"This is not a joke," I said. "Tell me this isn’t true. Tell me you're not involved in corruption and drugs, Dad."

Dad's mood shifted. He wiped his mouth with the table napkin. My forehead curled. He didn't even deny it.

"I don't like what you're saying right now, Winona. Whoever told you that wants to ruin me."

"Like what you did to the Ayasakis?"

Huminto siya.

He looked at me, annoyed. "You're still bringing that up?"

"Why wouldn't I?" I scoffed a bit. "You ruined someone's life, Dad. No wonder you easily planted that drugs in Akiro. It's because you've been dealing drugs yourself."

"Winona!" Dad's voice thundered.

Namilog ang mata ko.

I watched him stood up. Nakita ko ang ibang maid namin na umalis sa dining area. Kumuyom ang palad ko habang tinitignan si Daddy.

He was different. Scary different.

He glared at me. "Go to your room."

"I'm not a kid anymore!" tumayo ako. "Admit it, Dad! You're evil!"

"Do not forget that you helped me with my plans, Winona..." sabi niya. "You knew exactly what narrative the public needed to hear. You played your part well."

Nanginig ako. I shook my head. "I changed. I regretted everything I did for you"

"That doesn't change the fact that you were evil, too, Winona. You wanted a future too. A comfortable life. Respect. Status. Everything I did was for us. For you—"

"No!" I cut my father off. "You did everything for yourself, Dad. I never needed you for the past five years, haven't I?"

My father didn't talk.

"You never even noticed that you lost your daughter because of your greed," I bitterly continued. "How I wished I had died with Mom. I wouldn't want to live knowing what my father really is."

I locked myself in my room.

Akiro wasn't lying. I don't have proofs but God... my gut, my bones, my entire chest knew Akiro wasn’t lying. And standing there, facing the man who raised me, I felt something I never expected to feel toward my own blood. Shame. Deep, sinking shame.

I wanted to free my mind from thinking. I won't do that in my room or in this house. I'm never the type who goes to a bar alone. I don't drink when I have problems. But I think I need a drink for this.

Unknown number:

I want to talk about what happened. See me, please.

Hindi ko na kailangan manghula. It was Akiro's message last night pa.

Unknown number:

I'm in a meeting. I'll swing by your place later. Let's talk it out. This is our first huge argument, and I don't want to just leave it like that.

Unknown number :

Baby, where are you?

I didn't reply. I didn't want to see him. The truth is, naguguluhan ako. I don't know what to believe. Even if it's already in front of me.

I went inside Ampersand. A familiar feeling of rush entered my body. I lingered around the souls of the people dancing. Memories rushed like brainwaves. It was unusual.

Dumiretso ako sa bar stool. I sat there because I was alone. I felt like college again. I was a loner. I didn't want to admit it but it's true. I didn't have any friends. The only friend I had was a family member which shouldn't count.

I laughed at myself.

Someone sat on the chair beside me. Sumimsim ako sa tequila na hawak ko.

"Shit, pait. This drink tastes weird," he said as he looked at the drink. "I think it needs... your number."

He looked at me. Nagkatinginan kaming dalawa. My eyes widened when I saw Allen. Namilog din ang mata niya nang makita ako.

"Allen?" I asked.

"Winona," kumamot sa batok si Allen. "Gagi, ikaw pala. Akala ko kung sino..."

I laughed. Allen looked different. I mean, good different. His body was built larger. He's taller and he looked... well, neat. Akiro said he's a pilot now. Kaya siguro maayos siya tignan ngayon.

"Kumusta?" Allen gave me an amused smile. "Grabe, hindi kita nakilala. Akala ko artista, shit. Ganda mo lalo."

Umikot ang mata ko. "You look good, too, Allen. I heard pilot ka na. What airline?"

"Etihad," he said.

Tumango ako. "How are your... friends?" medyo lumihis ang tingin ko.

Allen noticed the air surrounding me. Tumikhim siya. "Ayos naman. Kasal na 'yong tatlo. Ikakasal na 'yong dalawa."

Dheia's getting married. I don't know who got married. Probably Juan since he was engaged in college.

I smiled. "Ikaw?"

"Ewan," tumawa si Allen. "Baka gusto mo, tayo nalang..."

Tumawa ako. I drank the rest of the tequila in my glass.

"Lakas mo pa din pala uminom," he said. "Gusto mo doon tayo sa table namin? I'm with the girls, too."

Hinigit ko ang hininga ko. "Uh, hindi na—"

"I'm not really leaving you here alone, Winona." Allen chuckled. "If you're worrying about Akiro, don't worry, wala iyon dito."

"I'm not just worried about that, Allen," ngumiti ako. "You know, things between us really ended badly. I know that you guys think I was the one who framed Akiro before. And I don't judge you for that."

Allen was quite surprised. Ngumiti lamang siya sa akin.

"I never thought of you like that, Winona," he said. "So, don't worry. Aawayin ko ang sino man mag-isip sayo ng ganoon."

I laughed.

Allen gave me the warmest smile. The warmest welcome. What happened in the past didn't matter. Like what I did didn't bruise our friendship. But I know it did. He was just kind enough to forgive me.

Kabanata 34

I would curse Allen out loud if I could.

Wala daw si Akiro pero hindi pa kami nakakalapit sa mesa niya, nakita ko na ang dalawang pares ng mata na nakapako sa akin. His thin eyes followed me as Allen dragged me into their table like I was a prey that he was about to eat!

Matalim kong tinignan si Allen. "I'm going to kill you."

Humalakhak si Allen. "Gago, h'wag ako. Pinasundo ka niya sa akin!"

Gago talaga!

Akiro clenched his jaw as he tapped the seat beside him. Nakarinig ako ng kantyaw sa iilang mga kaibigan niya. Dumiretso ako doon.

"Winona," Dheia looked at me.

I smiled a bit and looked at the huge group that Allen had. My eyes shifted to a familiar man beside him. I've seen him before with Dheia. I thought they were related before. Nilingon ko din ang ibang mga babaeng kasama ni Nicklaus, Primo at Riley.

Dheia changed a lot. She cut her hair shorter and well, she got prettier. Ganoon din si Allen at Riley. Hindi sila kumpleto dahil wala si Juan at Jackie.

Allen guided me to sit beside him. "Si Winona pala, guys. Winona..." he winked.

Kumunot ang noo ko sa kindat niya sa mga tropa niya. What does that mean? Secret language?

"Hi, Winona! I'm Quinnzel," she extended her hands. "I finally met you!"

"Wait, Quinnzel?" kumunot ang noo ko. "Quinnzel Samuel? Victoria's secret?"

Tumawa si Riley. "Kapangalan niya lang. Mas pangit naman 'yon!"

Umikot ang mata ni Quinnzel. "Sinabi ko sayo, Phia, huwag mo isama 'yang panganay mo."

"This is Blair and Phia! I believe you haven't met them." Allen said.

Phia Georginna?

Umawang ng kaunti ang labi ko. I can't believe I met Akiro who was friends with these people. And I can't believe I met them at the same table!

Akiro leaned closer to whisper in my ear. "We'll talk after this..."

Tumuwid ako ng upo at hindi siya nilingon. "I don't have anything to say to you."

He sighed and his hands went on my waist to pull me even closer. "You left and never told your boyfriend..."

Umusog ako palayo sa kaniya. "We're infront of your friends, Akiro..."

"Well, baby, I'm mad. I'm so mad at you," he whispered. "Uuwi ka sa akin mamaya..."

Kinagat ko ang dila ko. "What makes you think I'd do that?"

"Because I don't want you going home to your father," mahinang sabi niya. "Not until it's safe."

Hindi ako nagsalita. Kakaiba ang tingin sa akin ng mga kaibigan niya. Quinnzel and the other girls seem so familiarized by me like I've met them already. Malaki ang ngiti ng babaeng katabi ni Nicklaus.

"Paano ba 'yan, Dheia? May partner na si hapon sa kasal mo," Quinn smiled.

Dheia's eyes lifted to me. "Oh, yeah. I mean, if Winona doesn't mind."

"Do you have something to say to her first, Dheia?" Akiro asked his friend. He eyed her meaningfully.

Kumunot ng kaunti ang noo ko. Dheia seemed guilty about something. The man on her side whispered something to her. Ngumuso si Dheia.

"I'm sorry about what I said before, uhm, Win..." she said. "I really didn't know that you had nothing to do with... you know."

Kumunot lalo ang noo ko. Nilingon ko si Akiro na sumisimsim sa kaniyang alak. How did she know that I had nothing to do with what happened to Akiro?

Why is Akiro acting like he knew about it, too?

I cleared my throat. "It's okay, Dheia. I understand if you were mad at me. I should've talked to you about it."

"We were your friend, too, Winona. I shouldn't just look at it as Kiro's friend. Mali ako doon."

I didn't know how much I needed to hear that.

"It's all in the past now," I said. "But thank you for saying these, Dheia. I would love to be in your wedding."

Akiro's hands caressed the small of my back. Hindi ko siya nilingon pero alam kong nakatingin siya sa akin.

"Puta, naiiyak ako..." Riley commented.

"Nakaka-touch," Allen nodded and held his heart. Umikot ang mata ko.

Dheia laughed. "Remind me to remove these two from my wedding list!"

"If I had known better, I would never include them!" inis na sabi ni Quinnzel. "Narinig mo ba speech n'yan noong kasal ko?"

Umangat ang kilay ni Allen. "Bawi naman ako sa regalo."

"Ano regalo niya sa atin?" Nicklaus asked Blair.

"'Yong socculent na halatang malapit na mamatay."

Phia laughed.

"Galing pa 'yon 'nung kasal ko, ah?" Quinnzel exclaimed.

Allen laughed. "Tang ina kasi. Kasal ng kasal, naubusan na ako ng maisip!"

"Abangan mo regalo ko sayo sa kasal mo!" Quinnzel laughed.

"Kakaganyan mo sa akin, hindi na ako kinasal!" Allen looked stress. "Susunod si Dheia tapos sila Riley. Tang ina, susunod ka din, hapon?"

All eyes darted to Akiro. I didn't even realize that I was also the one they were referring to. Napa-inom ako ng shot ng girlfriend ni Riley.

Akiro chuckled huskily. "I already settled that a long time ago."

Tumuwid ako ng upo.

Nicklaus smirked. "Tagal na pala sinakop, eh."

"Hindi lang pala rehas ang hinimas!" Allen joked.

"Tang ina!" humalakhak si Riley na tinitigan ng masama ni Phia Georginna. "Sorry, sorry."

I pursed my lips. Now that I'm thinking about what Akiro said. I remember the very unusual thing he gave me before the cops took him away from me. It was their family heirloom. It was his proposal.

I had three drinks already. Akiro's friends were loud and they were all laughing at each other. I caught myself smiling. I suddenly forgot all my worries. All the things about my father.

"Tang ina, akala ko mamamatay na si Blair kung makahingi ng tulong si Klaus!" reklamo ni Quinn. "Five cm pa lang naman."

"E, puta, alam ko daw ba magpa-anak? Dentista ako, gago." Riley cursed.

Akiro smirked. "Now that you think about it, Klaus. I wouldn't call him. Tinaguan nga 'yan ng anak."

"Tang ina?"

Humalakhak si Allen. "Si Quinn pa talaga ang tinawagan mo. Alak lang naman alam n'yan ilabas, hindi bata."

Primo chuckled on Quinnzel's ear. Umirap na lamang si Quinnzel at hindi natuloy ang malutong nitong mura.

Dheia rolled her eyes. "I'm going to have my bachelorette party tomorrow, Winona. At my house. If you're free." she said to shift the conversation.

I hesitated. I thought about Dad and what I was going to do in Baguio. This is not what I came here for.

Phia smiled. "Don't worry, it's just a party. There won't be boys or anything."

Blair looked to me. "Umiinom ka naman, right?"

"Malakas 'yan uminom, si Win!" Allen nodded.

Akiro smirked.

Quinn lit up. "Talaga? Eto kasi si Phia laging binubuntis. Si Blair naman, breastfeeding. It's good to finally have someone to drink with!"

I laughed and nodded.

The night was drowned in laughter and teasing. I couldn't stop smiling while listening to his friends argue over the tiniest little thing. Tumatawa ako magdamag at hindi napansin ang titig ni Akiro sa akin.

Primo needed to take Quinnzel home because of drunkenness. Riley and Phia went home, too. Blair and Klaus left early after they told us that they were just buying something in the drugstore. Sila Dheia naman ay naiwan saglit para bumati sa ibang kakilala.

Akiro was behind me while I watched Allen walk alone. Humalukipkip ako habang pinapanood ko siyang paglaruan ang susi. I laughed and ran towards Allen.

"Thanks, Allen," I said as I leaped beside him.

He looked at me, a bit surprised. "Bakit?"

I smiled. "Well, you introduced me to your friends before. And you've been really nice to me even after what happened to Kiro."

"Tss," he smirked. "For the record, I only introduced you to my friends because I thought you were gonna be my girlfriend."

Umikot ang mata ko at tumawa. "Still. I'm genuinely happy for you right now."

Tinitigan niya ako. Nangingiti si Allen. He looked at the man behind us. Nakahalukipkip si Akiro habang nakatingin sa amin. His face was serious and relaxed. He was just watching us.

Allen laughed a bit. "Swerteng kumag..."

"Huh?"

"Wala," ginulo niya ang buhok ko. "Thank you, Winona. I'm happy where you are, too."

"I hope next time, you'll introduce your girlfriend to us."

"Ipagdasal mo," he joked. "Sige na, Win. Baka hindi na ako makauwi sa tingin ng boyfriend mo."

Pinanood kong umalis si Allen. I felt someone behind me. Hindi ko na kailangan hulaan kung sino iyon. I sighed and turned around to face him.

He bit his lips. "What did you tell him?"

Umiling ako. "I told him that I'm very happy where he is right now."

"As a friend?"

"What? Of course," sabi ko. "E, ikaw..."

"Hmm?"

"Are you happy where you are right now?"

Tinitigan niya ako. Matagal iyon. "No..."

I glanced at him. "Why not? You have a large business. You're rich. You can travel wherever you want. What's not to be happy for?"

Akiro breathed out slowly, eyes still on me. "None of that matters as much as people think it does."

"You're not happy?" I asked again, softer.

"Success feels empty when the person you wanted to share it with isn't there."

My chest tightened. "What do you mean?"

"I built everything I have now, Winona… but every milestone felt a little quieter, a little colder. I'm not happy. Not when the one thing I wanted most is the one thing I lost."

My heart dropped. Heavy, stunned, painfully aware.

"Kiro..."

He didn't look away. "I don't need more money. I don't need more power. I want the version of my life where you existed in it."

I used to stop this feeling before. I used to tell myself that it's not true. Whatever I felt was all for the plan to make my father win. But this time, it was clear. As clear as how I've seen Akiro's pain. As clear as how I now see how clear he had been with his feelings towards me.

"Even if I framed you?"

He licked his lips. "You didn't."

Nangilid ang luha ko. "How did you know that?"

"It doesn't matter, baby."

"I was a part of it, Akiro. I ruined your father. I ruined your family."

He clenched his jaw. "Enough, baby..." he tried to hold my hand but I pushed him softly.

"Do you still think I'm lying to you, Kiro?" I asked with pain in my voice. "Do you still think I'm not to be

trusted?"

Akiro's eyes softened. I swallowed hard. I watched how his hand opened to hold me. Kumuyom ang palad niya, bahagyang nanghina kahit hindi pa niya ako nahahawakan.

"I stopped caring about the lies, Win..." his voice shook. "You could lie to me today, tomorrow, for the rest of my fucking life. I'd still find my way back to you. It didn’t matter if you lied. It only mattered that it was you..."

"That wasn't my question," tears dropped. "Do you trust me now, Akiro?"

He combed his hair backwards. "Baby..."

I shook my head. "You don't."

"Winona..."

I turned my back. I sobbed until I reached my car.

Kabanata 35

Trust is strange.

I study it, define it, and break it down into patterns and theories. Trust breaks when safety breaks, when fear becomes louder than memory, when the brain chooses protection over possibility. I know why people doubt. I know how fear rewires the mind.

But the moment it’s my turn, the rules slip through my fingers. People protect themselves when they’ve been hurt, and Akiro… he’s no exception. I know that. I understand that.

"Gaga ka talaga!" Shannon exclaimed. "Nand'yan ka na naman? Oh, god. Flashbacks, flashbacks."

I sighed. "I have something to do here, Shan."

"Ayan na naman! Ano? May kalaban ulit si Tito? Chinese naman ngayon?"

"Shannon!" My voice rose a bit. "I'll tell you when I get back."

She sounded stressed. "I swung by your clinic, nasa bakasyon daw ang doktor. At malaman laman ko, hindi raw nakadalo 'yong mayamang hapon sa auction kahapon. Am I crazy or I'm connecting dots here?"

Snap.

"Wala akong kinalaman d'yan, Shannon."

Bumuntong hininga ang pinsan ko. "Just make sure you won't do something stupid. Magsex na nga kayo!"

I hung up.

Bumaba ako matapos ng mahabang pag-iisip. I saw my father in our dining area with a bunch of his political friends or whatever you call them. It refreshed a memory in my brain that I didn't want to think about.

"It's a good thing, Mayor, that we discussed that project. I'm hearing a lot of complaints about it. Ang dami raw substandards. I'm worried about the issues."

Dad laughed. "People doubt everything. That’s what people do. Do they know the engineering? The process? The risk? Wala silang alam. Let them talk. They’ll get tired."

The other person cleared his throat. "Malapit na ang bagyo, Mayor. Alam mo naman, baka mag-collapse 'yong drainage."

"It won't," Dad laughed. "If it did, then let it collapse! Alam mo kung ilang taon bago sila magsampa ng kaso? Alam mo kung ilang taon bago gumalaw ang gobyerno? By that time, elected na ako ulit."

I stopped walking. It was like I became deaf. The people he was talking to, laughed like my father was joking. But I know it was half-truth.

"People forget. Bigyan mo lang ng konting ayuda kapag may baha o landslide, tapos na ang issue," he continued. "Besides, people die all the time. I don't wish for it, but sometimes, they do. And you know what voters love? A good tragedy. Relief operations. Media. Sympathy. Alam n'yo na 'yan."

I felt my stomach twisting. Umalis ako at tumigil sa pakikinig. I didn't take it. I couldn't take it.

I grew up clinging to the idea of right and wrong, I felt… dirty. Parang bigla akong nadungisan just by being his daughter. Hindi ko matanggap na may ganitong klaseng pagiging manhid sa kapakanan ng tao.

Safety isn't optional. Hindi siya basic requirement. Hindi siya something na pwede mong tipirin. Hindi siya dapat ipinagwawalang-bahala just to save time, money, or image.

I felt this heavy disappointment crawl under my skin... slow, painful, humiliating. Because the world already had enough leaders who treated human lives like background noise, and I always believed I wasn't raised to become one of them. Pero ngayon? It felt like everything I valued. Morals, integrity, compassion. It was all tossed aside.

I felt like I was standing on the dividing line between who my father is and who I refuse to become.

I went to Dheia's bachelorette party, seeking to remove the thoughts in my head that have been eating me alive. I wore a simple dress and kitten heels. Wala akong nakuhang regalo kung hindi ang isang bote lamang ng wine na nakuha ko sa convenience store.

Her party was held in a wide backyard. They set up a beautiful tent on the side. May mga nakalatag na lamesa at mga pagkain sa gilid. It was like a kid's birthday party except it was a Bachelorette party. It's small, fun, and cute. Suits Dheia really well.

"I'm so glad you came!" Dheia greeted me with the widest smile wearing a short white dress and a mini veil.

I raised the wine. "I can't miss this."

"Thanks. You didn't have to bring anything naman..."

Dheia's party was full of food and instrumental music. She was wearing a bride's sash and there was a lot of confettis and bride displays everywhere. I saw a cake with a standing dildo in the middle.

"Guys, Winona's here!" she announced.

I smiled at some of Dheia's friends. I saw Quinnzel, Blair, Phia, and Jackie all over the desserts. Lumapit ako doon para bumati. Phia was the first one to greet me while she was biting on a strawberry.

Jackie smiled at me. "Hi, Winona! Grabe. Lalo ka gumanda!"

"I've been telling you that she looked like a doll," Quinnzel said. "Recruiters will die for that face."

Ngumisi ako. "Thank you."

Blair looked at me. May katabi siyang babae. Which I think was a celebrity or someone I recognized in a beauty pageant.

"This is Penny," Blair said. "Penny, it's Winona. You know... Winona."

"Oh!" Penny seemed surprised. "Akiro's..."

Tumango si Blair at tumawa ng kaunti. "Penny is Juan's wife."

Bumilog ang bibig ko.

Quinnzel groaned. "Halika nga rito, Winona. Mag-inuman tayo. These girls are boring!"

I laughed and sat down with her and Jackie. Nilapagan ako ni Jackie ng isang shot kaagad ng Bacardi. I looked at the rest of the girls. They laughed. I can't believe they all have kids or are expecting already. Hindi halata iyon.

"Malakas uminom si Win," Jackie bragged.

"So, I heard..." Quinnzel smiled.

"Oo, gago. Naalala ko, bagsak kami lahat, siya nakatayo pa din! Olats sa kaniya si hapon."

Quinnzel looked amazed. Nahihiya akong ngumiti. "Well, it's been a while since I drank so baka hindi na ganoon."

"I heard you're a doctor," Phia said. "Same with Dheia?"

Tumango ako. "I have a clinic in Makati."

"Makati..." Blair grinned. "Isn't that where Akiro's Manila headquarters is?"

Quinnzel smirked. "Smitten jerk."

I drank the shot of tequila from my glass. The teasing look from the girls drowned as they started talking about their own relationships. I learned that Phia and Riley have two children already. Blair has one and Penny is expecting.

"Childbirth is crazy," Blair said. "I mean, not to scare you, Penny, ha. That's why Klaus told me that it's one and done."

"Ewan ko ba kay Riley," Jackie laughed. "Buntis na naman si Phia next year, pusta ko."

Phia laughed. "It's different when you grew up alone, I think. I like having two or probably more."

Penny shrugged. "I'll probably have three."

"Ayos na sa akin ang anim," she laughed. "But for now, we're just trying to enjoy life without kids. No offense."

Jackie laughed. "Tang ina niyo. Sunod sunod na naman inaanak ko."

Blair looked at me. "Jackie doesn't plan to have kids. How about you, Winona?"

Nilingon ko si Jackie. Honestly, I haven't thought about it. Having children never touched my brain. I

don't know if I want it or not. Jackie's choice seemed practical. I mean, the world right now is really messy. You would choose not to raise a kid in this state.

Meanwhile, having kids is different. It's a responsibility. You have to be financially and emotionally responsible enough to raise a kid. How can you raise one if you can't even take care of yourself properly?

"Most of the Japanese people I know prefer one or two..." Quinnzel commented.

One or two.

Why am I even thinking about Akiro? Is he even a part of the question?

Ngumiti ako at sumimsim sa alak. "It's probably too early to decide on that..."

"Sabagay," Penny nodded.

"Kailan ba ipapakilala ni Allen 'yong girlfriend niya?" Jackie asked.

I raised my eyebrow. "Allen has a girlfriend?"

Quinnzel laughed. "Hindi naman niya girlfriend. 'Yon 'yung nambasted sa kaniya na taga-SLU. Kilala ni Dheia."

"Who?" Phia asked.

"I forgot her name, eh. Basta maganda na maputi tapos singkit. Chinese yata," Quinn added. "Pang-sampung basted na si Allen doon. Patay na patay."

"Ah, oo. Kaya pala bigla bigla nagcha-chinese school ang putangina noong college," Jackie laughed and clapped.

"Hindi pa sila noon?" Blair asked.

Tumawa muli si Quinn. "Hindi! Chinese iyon, mga ka-lahi din gusto nila. Asa pa naman si Allen kahit ipakita niya certificate niya sa Chinese school."

I laughed.

Phia smiled at me. "It's probably rough with you and Kiro right now. Dealing with past scandal and such..."

Tumango ako. "Oo pero nag-usap na kami ni Akiro. We cleared everything now."

"I can't imagine what he'd been through," Quinnzel said. "When he got out of jail, his mother died and his father blamed him for it? Ang lala."

Binaba ko ang alak ko. Nilingon ko si Quinnzel. She told the story to the girls and no one reacted because they already knew about it a long time ago. But I didn’t.

What?

His mother died and his father blamed him for it.

Jackie looked at me. "But everything was misunderstood, Winona. Dheia felt really bad about the things she said to you. Wala kang kasalanan doon."

"Politics is so dirty," Blair voiced. "It's all about money, nowadays. What is it about having a lot of money? Hindi naman nila madadala sa hukay."

Tulala ako. For some reason, the drink in my hand became more bitter. Parang hindi ko na kayang lumunok ng maayos. How can I not know about these? Did Dad know? Probably. He probably still doesn't care that someone died because of him.

Hindi ko napansin na medyo lumalabo na ang paningin ko. I was already tipsy but Jackie and Quinnzel were already down. Dheia called Primo for Quinn.

"Thanks again, Dheia," I heard Primo say. "I hope she's not pressuring your wedding planning and stuff."

Dheia laughed. "You know Quinnzel... hindi naman 'yan papayag na hindi perfect. Take care!"

"Isasabay ko na sila Phia," Primo said. "Baka hindi masundo nila Riley..."

"Huh, bakit?"

"You didn't know?" Primo looked a bit surprised. "They took Saint for a surprise bachelor's party."

Kumunot ang noo ni Dheia. "What?"

Hinilamos ni Blair ang palad niya sa mukha. "Gago talaga..."

"Ewan ko ba sa asawa ni Phia!" tumatawang sabi ng lasing na si Jackie. I watched how Phia rolled her eyes.

I watched how Blair tries to pull Jackie towards Primo's car. Nasa harapan si Quinnzel at nakatulog na doon. Phia and Penny bid their goodbyes to Dheia who seemed to still be upset about the bachelor's party.

"How about Win?" Penny asked.

I stayed at the table. I couldn't stand since my head is already spinning. Ang dalawang kainuman ko ay halos gapangin papunta sa sasakyan. I remained seated.

"Shucks, puno na sasakyan..." Blair said. "I'll stay nalang. Klaus will be here soon—"

Tumigil kami nang pumarada ang asul na Bentley sa garahe ni Dheia. Mabilis na lumabas si Akiro doon. He was wearing a white long-sleeved polo and black pants. Magulo ng kaunti ang buhok niya at medyo iritado.

"I guess there's no need for that," Penny laughed.

Primo tapped his shoulder and said something. Tumama ang tingin niya sa akin. My eyes dropped on the last unfinished tequila in my glass.

"Nand'yan na pala ang sundo mo, Winona..." Blair smirked at me.

I watched Akiro take a large step towards me. He clenched his jaw as he watched me with my drunk face.

"Nalasing," ngumuwi si Dheia. "Sorry."

Akiro nodded. "Thanks for inviting her..." I heard as I tried to stand up. "If you don't mind, I'll leave her car here. Babalikan nalang bukas..."

"No worries," Dheia replied.

Naramdaman ko ang kamay ni Akiro sa baywang ko. I managed to push him a little bit. Hinagilap ko ang bag ko para sa susi ng sasakyan ko.

He grabbed my bag away from me. "You can't drive."

Matalim ko siyang tinignan. "What? You can't even trust my driving?"

He clenched his jaw. "Let's talk about this at home."

He pulled me towards his car. Iritado akong sumakay doon. I forgot to thank Dheia and the girls so I opened the window. Nilabas ko ang ulo ko at kinawayan si Dheia na natataranta sa kaniyang fiancé ngayon. She waved at me.

The other car has the girls. Hirap na hirap si Blair ipasok si Jackie sa loob.

"H'wag mo muna buntisin 'yan, Akiro!" Jackie shouted.

Akiro entered the driver's seat and slightly pulled my dress down. "You'll see them again, Winona. Sit down, please."

I didn't talk. Bumalik na ako sa pagkakaupo. I don't really remember the next thing. I just know that I slept on his passenger seat.

I woke up in an empty bed. The windows are open. I saw the smoke coming from the veranda outside. The only thing that lit up the room was the moon outside. It was peeking.

On my side was a bunch of makeup wipes. I was still wearing the dress a while ago. Except I felt cleaner like I didn’t drink the shit out of that tequila. Hindi ko na kailangan manghula kung kaninong kwarto iyon.

I sat on the bed and hugged my knees. Tulala ako habang iniisip ko ang mga nangyari. I felt the curtain from the veranda move. Lumabas doon si Akiro. He came out for a smoke because I smelled a scent of it.

Nagkatinginan kami. He wasn't wearing anything except black sweatpants. I could see his tattoo sleeves clearly. Lumapit siya sa akin at umupo sa paanan. Umiwas ako ng tingin.

"I want to go home," bulong ko.

Akiro touched my feet. "It's midnight, baby. Go back to sleep."

Inurong ko ang paa ko mula sa hawak niya. Lumandas ang sakit sa mga mata niya habang pinapanood akong lumayo. I hugged my feet tighter. Nangilid ang luha ko.

"You asked me if I trust you," he whispered. "I thought about saying it without making it sound like an order or a bargain."

"You don't have to tell me anything. I understand, Akiro. You have trust issues—"

"I was in jail, Winona," he cut me off. "I didn't sit there wondering why you probably did that. I sat there wondering if you were okay. If you were scared. If someone forced you. If you were crying. If you needed me..."

Tears dropped in my eyes. "Your mother died and your father blamed you for it, Akiro. You had every right to get mad at me and to not trust me."

"I probably should've hated you, Winona. That’s what everyone expects. But all I felt was… this stupid, relentless need to protect you, even if the whole world was telling me you ruined me."

"You can't love me and not trust me, Akiro."

Akiro wiped my tears gently. "Baby, I tried not to trust you. I failed. My heart didn’t care what my head screamed."

I felt free.

I felt the freedom of feeling. The freedom of letting my emotions win. The freedom of admitting that my feelings for Akiro never really left. It was here, all along.

Kabanata 36

I sobbed between Akiro's kisses.

He kissed my cheek and hushed me down. I felt his hand on my hair, caressing it softly. Nagkatinginan kami. Ngumuso ako at bahagyang nainis nang tigilan niya akong halikan.

"Stop crying so I'll kiss you better," he whispered.

I swallowed hard and kissed his lips. He groaned softly and pushed his head towards me. Mabagal at magaan ang mga halik ni Akiro. Hanggang sa bumilis iyon. He started kissing me like he was hungry for it.

I groaned as I pushed him lighter. Magaan ang pagkakatulak ko pero parang galak na galak siya at nahiga. I was kissing him on top. I started sitting on his top as he rose a bit for me not to crouch too much. Tinukod niya ang dalawang siko sa kama habang nakapatong ako.

He started kissing my neck up to my chest. I was only wearing a thong and my crotch was directly hitting his bulge. It was a huge bulge.

I started grinding my waist and feeling him underneath a soft cloth. Umawang ang labi ni Akiro habang pinapanood ako. Kumunot ng kaunti ang noo niya. Hindi sa inis. It was more like a pleasure.

"Lie down..." he was weak.

I removed my dress. Umigting ang panga ni Akiro nang ihagis ko sa kung saan man ang damit ko. He licked his lips as he stared at me only wearing underwear. He groaned when I started removing my bra. Umangat ang kamay niya at pinilit na siya ang mag-alis pero tinaboy ko ang kamay niya.

"Damn it, baby," he stared at my breasts. "Let me, please. Lie down..."

I stood up on the floor and by the end of the bed, between his legs. I pulled his pants and boxers. Nanginig ang kamay ko. I stared at his perfectly erect member. I have seen it before. But now is different. His body grew larger, does that mean this, too?

I held his member. Nagkatinginan kami ni Akiro. His eyes were pleading. I slowly crouched to kiss him there. My mouth seemed too small for it. He was too huge. The moment I tried to do it, it won't... well, go in.

"Fuck! Baby, come here..." he whispered as he pulled me out of there. My lips were still apart as he placed me on the bed.

"But I want—"

He pushed me down the bed. "I don't want you kneeling."

"I want to pleasure you too, Kiro..." mahinang sabi ko.

"Spread your legs wide. Moan for me," he pulled my panties down and threw them somewhere. "That's my pleasure."

I couldn't remember exactly the feeling of him inside of me. He placed my legs on his shoulders. My lips almost bled because of how I bit them when he slowly entered my entrance.

It hurts. But it didn't hurt like the first time. Tinatantsa ni Akiro ang expression ko. He would slow it down every time I felt the pain. Kalaunan, humupa ang sakit. The pain was replaced by pleasure. Ultimate pleasure.

"Oh my god," I gasped. "Kiro..."

He kissed my breasts until my lips. His lips curved as he heard me whimpering his name. I scratched his back as if I couldn't hold onto anything but him.

His thrust was strong. Strong enough for my head to hit the headboard. The sound of the bed screeching was loud but my moans were louder!

"Damn it, Kiro!"

"Fuck. Are you near?" he whispered.

Tumango ako. I closed my eyes. I felt my limbs shaking. He pulled my waist and banged myself on his member strongly. A loud and long moan escaped from my lips when I reached the climax.

Eventually, I felt his hot liquid inside me. Dumiin ang hawak ko sa balikat ni Akiro at naramdaman kong bumagsak siya sa itaas ko. We were both panting.

He kissed my ear. "I'd better clean you up."

He lifted me from the bed. Kalaunan, bumagsak kaming dalawa sa bathtub. I didn't know how or why but we ended up having another round in the bathtub.

Five years ago, after Akiro left, I never felt like I'd love again. I met guys before. Doctors, businessmen, guys with titles, and Rex. Sumagi sa isip ko kung magmamahal ba ulit ako.

With Rex, I was a kid. I was stubborn. I was curious what love felt like. I was curious about kissing and all that stuff. When he cheated on me, it felt like a candy being stolen from me. I realized now that it was shallow.

Akiro was different. He wasn't something I decided on. He wasn't convenient or expected. It was unwelcome. He was the kind of feeling that slipped under my guard when I wasn't looking, when I wasn't trying, when I didn't even want it. Akiro was in pain, but the kind that made everything sharp and alive. The kind that reminded me I had a heart that could still react on its own.

"When did you got these..." bulong ko habang hinahaplos ang tattoos niya sa balikat niya.

Nakayakap sa akin si Akiro. We were both not wearing anything under a thick white blanket. His arm was above my chest where I could see his tattoos clearly.

His nose was on my temple. Medyo pagod na siya. Ako din naman. I feel really sore. But if he were to ask me again, I wouldn't hesitate. Ano?

"A long time ago," he said. "In Japan."

"What do these mean?" I traced every line on his arm. There were a lot of figures and letters. I saw angel wings, some crosses, triangles, an eye, letters, and lines.

He held my hand and guided it to everything on his arm. "This one's an archangel. Angel wings. It means protection."

Ngumiti ako. "And this... the eye?" I pointed at an eye.

"They're yours."

Kumunot ang noo ko. "What?"

He looked at me. "It's your eyes, baby. I drew them as I remember them."

Lumunok ako at hindi nagsalita. Now that I'm staring at it, it does resemble my eyes. Humugot ako ng malalim na hininga. He traced a Japanese word written on the side.

"Do you remember this?"

Umangat ang kilay ko. "What's that..."

"Haven't I shown you how to write your name in Japanese?" he asked.

Nagkatinginan kami.

"It's me..."

He licked his lips. "I only ever thought about you."

Pakiramdam ko, ayaw ko matulog. I just wanted to stay awake and remember how Akiro held me. I just wanted him. I only ever wanted him.

I almost forgot everything I needed to face. I forgot the real thing in front of me.

Being with Akiro, I felt like the emotions were clearer. I wanted the lies to stop. I wanted the betrayal and everything evil to stop. I have had enough.

"What are you going to do with my father, Akiro?" I asked.

He pulled a sigh. "I already reached out to people I trust. Journalists. A lawyer. Someone in the commission who’s clean. It's the smartest thing to do."

Sinubsob ako mukha ko sa dibdib ni Akiro. "I just can't believe my Dad is that kind of person..."

"Your father is dangerous. He's protecting dangerous people."

I gasped. "Dangerous people? You mean, politics, too?"

He nodded. "Maybe. I'm thinking it's the reason that's why he was desperate to win. They clean your father's tracks, while he gives them access. He's protecting them. He's just the face they need."

Nanghina ako. It's dirty. It's bad and it's stupid. And it's all my father.

"That is why I need you to go back to Manila, baby. I don't want you in this mess."

"My father is evil but he won't hurt me."

"We don't know that yet," sabi niya. "Let me handle everything."

"Alone?"

"I'm not alone. I've got the right people handling it. And I don't need you in the middle of a mess that isn't yours."

Akiro was determined to bring my father down. I was, too. I was sick of it. From the looks of it, my father has been funded by much bigger people.

Long before the election started, bigger people, people whose names never appear on any ballot had already chosen him. They funded him, protected him, cleaned his tracks, and in return, they expected obedience. They needed someone polished, respectable-looking, someone the public would vote for without question.

My father was perfect. He's educated, he served this city before, and he has clean tracks. He was the perfect thing to use for evil.

If he won, he became their face. Their access. Their hands in government. If he lost, he became useless.

I parked my car in the city hall of Baguio where my father is, usually. Tumunog ang heels ko habang papasok doon. Anger circulated around my heart. Kumuyom ang palad ko habang pinapanood ko isa-isa ang mga tao doon.

I wonder if they're the same people who support the evil things my father does. I wonder if they knew that people are losing their lives because of monsters like them. I wonder if it's all just about money for them.

"Ma'am? Ma'am, hindi kayo pwede rito!" Someone stopped me from going to the conference room.

Huminto ako. "I am the Mayor's daughter."

He hesitated. "Tatawagin ko nalang po si Mayor. May meeting siya ngayon—"

"Don't worry, this won't be long," I turned my back and before he could come and stop me, I already opened the heavy, mahogany door.

The door slammed against the wall, echoing through the city hall conference room. Napatingin sa akin ang lahat ng nandoon. My eyes lingered on every person at the huge table. My father was sitting in the middle. Recognizable people were there, some I only see on TV, some I've seen in our house, and some were new.

My eyes dropped on the things on the table. Bundles of money. Sealed drugs. Papers. Everything has labels.

Nanlamig ako.

"What the hell, Winona?" my father's voice echoed. "Who let you in? Mark!"

The man behind me couldn't talk anymore. He shut the door behind me. Para akong sinabuyan ng malamig na tubig. Nilingon ko si Daddy. He tried to pack up the money, the drugs in a huge box.

"You're dealing drugs inside the city hall?" medyo malakas kong sabi. My hand shook.

"Is this your daughter, Felix?" iritadong sabi ng isa. "The doctor?"

Mariin kong tinignan iyon. Some looked uneasy, some looked annoyed. Dad stood up. He was nervous. These people are the people he was protecting. The one he obeys.

"Winona, go home—"

"No!" I shouted. "Is this people's money? Is that what the projects are for? What is this, Dad?"

Hinilot ng isang opisyal ang ulo niya. "Hija, this is not something you just stick your nose into. Listen to your father and go home."

Someone replied. "Felix, we can't guarantee she won't stay out of it."

"No. She will stay out of this—"

"No," I said. "I will talk in court. To the media. Maybe they would love to know where their taxpayers' money goes."

"Winona!" Dad exclaimed. "You're talking to a general."

"What is he going to do?" I shot. "Kill me to shut up? In this city hall? Good luck covering that up."

Another man stood, stepping forward. "You think we've never done this before?"

I stood on my ground. I wasn't nervous that they're going to hurt me. I'm more disgusted. Surprised that they don't even look scared that I'm going to tell. They knew they wouldn't let me do that. They're strong. They are with powers.

"Congressman, she has nothing to do with this," my father said. "Leave my daughter alone."

"She will talk, Mayor Felix. You would let that happen? Ang lahat ng pinaghirapan natin, mawawala lang dahil sa anak mo?"

My father's face lost its color.

He stepped closer to me, voice trembling. "Winona… listen to me. Please. Leave the room and forget everything you saw. I'll handle this. Just go."

One of the men stood now, straightening his jacket. "This is enough. She stays until we decide what to do. I don't like risks."

My father tensed. "She is not staying. She's leaving."

"You don’t make that decision," the general said quietly. "You work for us. Don’t confuse your position."

The room felt smaller.

Nilingon ako ng general. "Sit. You're not going anywhere until we make sure you won't talk."

Dad looked at me, eyes pleading. "Winona, please. Don't fight them."

It was the first time I saw my father scared. My father always had authority over everyone. He walks into a room and everyone bows to him, respecting him. This was the only room that felt different.

I was numb. I didn't want to admit it but I was damn scared.

Hours later, I found myself with four men dragging my arm and my father pleading behind us. They were good enough to lock me up in our house, in my own room. They confiscated everything. My phone, my iPad. They locked my windows and my door.

I found myself in my room which felt empty. Prison. People are guarding me. As I waited. I waited until the big people decided what to do with me. For all I know, they'll either cut my tongue or kill me. Either way, I felt nothing.

Kabanata 37

I was locked up like a prisoner. I watched how the door opened and a food slid up from it. Tinitigan ko iyon habang yakap yakap ko ang sarili ko sa kama.

I didn't eat. Lumipas ang gabi at hindi pa din ako dinadapuan ng gutom. I didn't know who was outside my door but I could hear the voices of men. They would knock and open my door a little to get the tray or give me the tray.

"Hindi kumakain," I heard someone say when they grabbed the tray.

It was late at night.

"Ano sabi ni General? Bibigyan lang ng pagkain? Hindi titignan kung kakainin?"

"Basta sabi nila bigyan lang ng pagkain," someone replied.

"Tsk, tsk. Anak ba talaga ni Mayor 'yan?" narinig ko habang sinasarado na ang pinto. "Itanong mo kay General kung pwede galawin bago iligpit."

I hugged my knees tighter. My eyes were swollen because of crying. I don't even remember if I have gotten sleep or not. I don't know what time it is. I don't know what day it was.

The second day, my body felt weaker. I hadn't eaten anything. I woke up when the door opened and someone walked in. I saw my father with his weary eyes.

His eyes dropped on me. Tired and seemed to be sleepless. Naupo siya sa kama habang ako ay napaupo. I desperately crawled to the edge of the bed just to meet my father. Dad touched my cheek.

"You have to eat, Winona," he whispered.

I didn't move.

"What's the point? They're going to kill me, anyway."

"I won't let that happen," Dad said.

Nilingon ko siya. Nangilid ang luha ko. I sobbed.

"Why are you doing this, Dad? This isn’t you. This isn’t what you want... right?"

Daddy looked at me. "There’s only one way out of this. You have to give them your loyalty. You have to tell them you're with me."

Umiling ako. Mabilis na tumulo ang mga luha ko matapos marinig ang gustong gawin ni Daddy.

"So your solution is for me to say I’m one of you? That I’m… some kind of accomplice? Dad, do you hear yourself?"

"If you tell them you were feeding me information from the Ayasakis before… if you act like you’re on our side… maybe they’ll let this go."

"Maybe?" I swallowed the bitterness rising in her throat. "You want me to throw Akiro's family under the bus. You want me to put my integrity in the hands of criminals. And for what? To protect their mess?"

Naririnig ba niya ang sinasabi niya? He wants me to lie again? To lie for his sake. For his schemes.

"If you fight this, they will shut you up. They will not hesitate. I've seen what they can do."

I glared at my father. "I'd rather die with a clean conscience than live as a part of this."

"We cannot do anything!" Father screamed as he stood up. "I can't do anything about this, Winona! You have to swear you will never tell a soul about this or else they will kill us both. Do you hear me?"

Natakot ako.

I sobbed. Umiling ako. I crawled to my father. Hinawakan ko ang braso ni Daddy.

"We can do something," I desperately said. "You can call Akiro. Call him, Dad..."

Kumunot ang noo ni Daddy sa akin. "Are you still in touch with that Ayasaki?"

I sobbed. "He will save me. He will save us, Daddy. We'll tell him that you're sorry about the drugs. He will forgive you. He will sue those people—"

"Winona!" he screamed my name. "You think that boy will scare them off? You're still thinking like a child. No hero is coming from that door."

"Dad, just please call—"

He stood away from me. "You will swear your loyalty to them, Winona. Iyon lang ang paraan. Sa ayaw at sa gusto mo."

I cried.

Hindi na ako makahinga sa kakaiyak ko. I sobbed. My cries echoed in my room. I called my Dad with the weakest voice. I never hear an answer.

I passed out on the floor.

I didn't know how long I stayed like that. My lips are dry. I woke up with a sore and dry throat. I thought I was going to die.

The door opened. Bumukas din ang ilaw ko kaya napagtanto ko na gabi na iyon. I saw a pair of shiny black shoes infront of my face. Nakahandusay pa din ako sa sahig. Umangat ang tingin ko at nakita ang pamilyar na General.

With stars all over his shoulders. With pride in serving Filipinos. It couldn't hide the devil's smile on his face. The evil still creeps out of the shiny stars and the respectful uniform he got.

"You're tough," the general said and he squats in front of me. "You're really the Mayor's daughter. Nakuha mo ang tapang ng ama mo."

I smirked as I stared at his face. "I see you on the news. You caught drug dealers. I wonder if you ever

caught the man you see in your mirror."

Tumawa siya. Yumuko at may ngisi sa labi nang umangat ang tingin sa akin.

"Do you know what happens to people who stick their noses into other people's business?" he asked me.

Tumawa ako ng kaunti. "Stop wasting your time threatening me. Whatever my father said to you, I'm not doing it. I'm not kissing your asses. Hindi ninyo ako kakampi!"

He stared at me for a while. Nakita ko ang paglandas ng inis sa mukha niya dahil sa pagmamatigas ko. I had myself ready for a slap or a torture.

I watch this on movies. My mouth will probably bleed. I would probably look like a swollen monkey if they ever torture me.

"Maswerte ka at nagmamakaawa ang ama mo para hindi kita saktan," he said to me. "Your father raised a very stupid girl. You think moral righteousness will save you? You think everything we built will be easily ruined by children with big mouths?"

"All this power, all this money you stole, and you're scared of a girl who speaks the truth?"

Nagkatinginan kami. I felt his anger. He lifted his hand and he was ready to slap me. I closed my eyes and moved my head slightly, getting ready for my head to be blown. Until his phone rang.

Malutong na mura ang pinakawalan niya. Matalim ang tingin niya sa akin pagkatapos ay tumayo.

I swallowed hard.

He pulled out his phone. "What?"

Ilang segundo ay kumunot ang noo niya ang tinignan ako lalo ng masama. Gumapang ako malapit sa vanity table ko. My hand crawled as I reached for something. My hair curler.

"Lock the gates. I'll take care of the Mayor's daughter."

Before he would come close to me, I smacked his face with my Dyson hair curler. Tumama iyon sa nguso niya. Namilog ang mata ko. I kicked something between his legs as I ran towards the door.

Nabuksan ko iyon. Humabol sa akin iyong general pero naisara ko iyon. The guards weren't there anymore. I screamed as I saw two men running towards the stairs.

"Oh, no. Oh, no!" I screamed as I ran towards the master's bedroom.

I locked the door. Walang tao doon. Nataranta ako lalo nang narinig ko ang malakas na pagtulak sa pintuan. Tumakbo ako sa veranda. I managed to lock it.

Madilim sa labas. I saw cars outside our gate. Sa ibaba ng veranda ay ang garden namin. If I jump, I would lose a toe or probably a leg. Nanginig ang kamay ko. I started cursing loudly.

The door broke.

I cried as I crouched. Humikbi ako ng tahimik, pinipilit na huwag ako marinig. I prayed and prayed. I was so scared. They will hurt me. They will kill me. They probably had guns.

"Winona!" someone called me somewhere.

Pumikit lamang ako. Umiling. They can't find me. They can't reach me.

"Baby," I heard a voice.

Namilog ang mata ko. I stood up. I saw the men in the master's bedroom searching for me in the closet, in the bathroom, and even in the cabinets. They can't seem to find the veranda because it's small and huge curtains are covering it.

I looked down the veranda. I saw Akiro. Umawang ang labi ko. Sa ibaba ay nakita ko ang iilang mga NBI. They were all carrying guns. I even saw Nicklaus running inside our house.

"Baby, you have to jump."

I cried. "I... I can't!"

"It's okay. It's okay, my love," he opened his palms. "I'll be here."

"I'm scared, Kiro..." my voice shook. "I'm so scared."

"I know, baby. I know..." the pain was written on his voice. "But you've got to trust me. I'll catch you. I promise."

I screamed when the men opened the curtain and saw me. Sinigaw nila ang pangalan ko. The veranda was locked and they had to break the windows before they got to me.

"You have to jump now!" Akiro shouted.

Nagmamadali akong umakyat sa veranda. The men started pointing guns at me. I saw the general entering the room. He pulled out his gun on me, as well. Like they were going to shut me up before I could even reach out to the authorities.

But I jumped.

I jumped before they pulled the trigger.

I landed on Akiro's arms. We both fell on the grass.

When I thought I was already safe. Naramdaman ko ang kirot sa balikat ko. Blood started flowing from my shoulders as Akiro held me tighter.

His eyes were bloodshot with fear and anger. He held me tight, screamed my name, and screamed for help.

It was the last thing I saw before my vision went black.

Kabanata 38

I woke up in a white empty room.

My head felt lighter than usual. The scent reminds me of chemicals and alcohol. I tried to move my hand but my shoulder was a little painful. Dumilat ako at nakita ang sarili na nakahiga at may nakatusok na swero sa kamay ko.

The first person I saw was Shannon. She rushed towards me. Behind her were my aunt and uncle. They both came panicking when they saw that I opened my eyes.

"Call the doctor, Dad!" Shannon screamed at her father.

I licked my dry lips. Shannon held my hand and almost cried. Medyo namumula ang mga mata niya. She cried harder.

"Do you know me?" she sobbed.

"Akiro..." My throat hurts as I speak. "Dad... where's Daddy?"

Tita panicked as Tito ran to fetch the doctor. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang nangyayari. Luminga linga ako. For some reason, I can't see other people around. The last thing I remember was me jumping out of the veranda and looking down at my shoulder bleeding. Akiro caught me. He managed to.

"Akiro, he..." Shannon had difficulty talking because she was crying. "He's cooperating with the authorities. Don't worry about anything. You were shot! Ayos ka lang ba? Bilangin mo ang daliri ko."

She lifted her fingers.

Kumunot ang noo ko. "I got shot, Shannon. I didn't bump my head."

She sobbed even more. "The sass is back. She's fine!" she declared to her parents.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

Kinagat ni Tita ang labi niya. She sighed. "Felix has been arrested as well as the officials who were involved."

Kumurap kurap ako.

Shannon held my hand tight. "I'm sorry, Winona. I know you're still in shock about everything. I can't imagine how you've been through."

"I can't believe Felix would do this!" Tita exclaimed. "He kidnapped his own daughter!"

I swallowed. "What would happen to Daddy?"

"The lawyer said that they're still in custody for investigation," Tita said as she held my hand. "Winona, as much as we all feel worried about your father, hindi namin matanggap na kaya niya iyong gawin sayo. Much more than the things that he did with the money and drugs!"

Pumikit ako ng mariin. Dad was used by those people. But Tita was right. Mali si Daddy. His decision was wrong. What he did was wrong. Although, he tried to protect me, it doesn't change the fact that he was wrong.

"It's all over the news," Shannon said. "I mean, of course it should be. Government officials and generals are involved. They've been stealing money from taxpayers, not just in Baguio but in the whole country!"

Dumating ang doctor para i-check ako. He ran a couple of checks before he declared that I was fine. I just needed to rest for today. Bukas ay makakauwi na ako.

Shannon and her family had to drive to Baguio because of what happened. They left their jobs just to be here. I saw how disappointed Tita is with Dad, her brother. She felt what I was feeling. The kind of disappointment you can't shake.

"You know, Winona, that your father has to go to jail and pay for everything he did," Tito said.

Tumango ako. "It's the right thing to do."

"Whatever happens, just remember that we're here for you."

Ngumiti ako. I lay in the cold hospital bed and closed my eyes. "If you don't mind, I'm taking a rest."

"You should eat first. The doctor said that you still need food aside from the dextrose."

"Wala pa akong gana, Tito. I'm feeling a bit sleepy."

"Okay, Winona," he said, standing up. "Kailangan ako ng lawyer ng Daddy mo pero bibisita sayo mamaya si Shannon. Just take a rest and don't worry about anything. Make sure you eat when you wake up."

The room was empty.

I hugged myself. My lips trembled as I thought about everything. Hindi ko alam kung saan magsisimula mag-alala. My father is going to jail because of everything he has done.

I almost died.

Those people wanted me dead. They wanted me to die before I could even open my mouth. They'd do anything to make me shut up. And now, they're arrested.

I'm scared. I'm scared because I know now what they can do. Their secret had gone out. I'm scared for Akiro's life. For my life. My friends. My family. I don't know if this is over now.

I woke up with a hand on my hand, slowly caressing it. I felt a kiss on it and heard someone. Binuksan ko ang mata ko.

Nakayuko ang ulo ni Akiro at nakalagay ang noo sa kamay ko. He kissed my hand tenderly. I don't know the time but I guessed that it was already night.

"I'm sorry, I love you so much, I'm sorry..." he kept on whispering.

Gumalaw ako. Akiro's head rose and looked at me. His eyes were weary. Magulo ang buhok at magulo

din ang puting long-sleeved polo na suot niya. His lips were red as if he kept biting them for so long. Namumula ang ilong niya at tenga.

He looked tired.

"Baby," he touched my cheek. "Don't move too much. Does it hurt? Where's hurting?"

Umiling ako at nangilid ang luha. "I was waiting for you... all day."

He licked his lips. "I had to help the authorities arrest the people who hurt you."

Tumulo kaagad ang luha ko. I saw Akiro panicked. He hushed me down. Nagsisi siya kaagad na sinabi niya iyon.

"My dad, Kiro..." I sobbed. "My dad's going to jail."

He clenched his jaw. "He did bad things, my love..."

Tumango ako. "I know. I know he deserves it, Kiro. He deserves to pay for the things he did to people. He did to you."

"I got to talk to him," he whispered and kissed my hand. "Before the authorities got them."

I looked at him now. "What did he say..."

"He's sorry," tumango siya. "He regrets everything."

"Did you... forgive him?"

He paused for a while. Tila na nag-isip.

He touched my cheek. "He did a lot of terrible things, Winona. Things that hurt you and hurt other people. But in all of those mistakes, there was one good thing he did."

"What good thing?"

"You."

My lips curved into a small smile. Pinakatan ni Akiro ng halik ang labi ko. I closed my eyes and felt how my chest lifted a bit. Gumaan ang pakiramdam ko. I was calm. I didn't want to worry anymore.

Nakaramdam ako ng gutom, kalaunan. Akiro watched me as I filled my mouth with food that he bought. I never felt hungrier in my life.

Akiro walked me through what happened. Nakikinig lamang ako habang kumakain.

"Hindi ka nagrereply sa messages ko," he said. "I went to your house and the people said you went back to Manila. I would know if you were in Manila. I figured something happened."

Lumunok ako. "How did you know that I was locked?"

"I have a few people in the city hall," he confessed.

Kumunot ang noo ko. "You had been spying on my father?"

"How do you think I had all the evidence, Winona?" he asked. "I knew you'd eventually end up in that place after I told you about your father. You're stubborn and brave. And you don’t walk away from something you believe is wrong."

"You sound like you predicted everything I do, Akiro."

"I know you wouldn’t just sit still while your father tangled himself in something dangerous. You’d try to fix it. Even if it puts you at risk."

Nagtiim bagang ako.

I remembered how it was before. I was competitive. Even in the tiniest little things, I wanted to win. I wanted to be the first in everything. Because I was so confident about myself. I was so good at so many things. That's what I believed so.

Even though Akiro was better than me.

But Akiro puts his guard down just for me to win. Always. He would choose me. Than himself.

"I can't..." Akiro's voice shook. "I can’t lose you to your own goodness, Winona."

"You were risking your life for me, Akiro."

His thumb brushed my hand like he was afraid I’d disappear. "I don't like hurting you. So why would I ever let anyone else hurt you?"

I realized how different it was with Akiro.

I never said it. I never said that I loved him. He always says it to me. Never asking anything in return.

He also never says it always. But he never fails to say something that sounds like it. I could feel it. It's like I don't even need him to say it. Hindi ko kailangan marinig na sabihin niya na mahal niya ako dahil nararamdaman ko iyon palagi.

Akiro said my father confessed everything. The kidnapping… the money… the threats. Because of that, his lawyers say he’ll likely face lighter charges and a reduced sentence. But the other were still in custody, and their trial will be harsh.

It won’t undo the past, but it helps. He’s admitting what he did and facing it. Justice is still being served.

I sat in front of Dad after a day of resting. I wanted to see him but Akiro suggested that I should rest first, so I did. I wanted to compose myself before I finally faced Dad.

Dad's cell was a decent room. A small bed, table, and restroom. Just enough for him to live well.

"Thank you for visiting me, Winona," Dad said.

Nangilid kaagad ang luha ko. Dad had trouble looking at me. He looked away. I saw how red his face has gotten. He wanted to cry but he couldn't.

"Dad," I said. "I heard you confessed. You owned up to what you did..."

Dad nodded. "I did what I could. It's too late, Winona. It's been too late for me to regret everything."

Umiling ako. "It's not, Dad. That's why you're here. You have to pay for everything. And you will do that."

"It's not going to bring back anything. I already lost you, long before I realized," he said. "Noong nawala ang Mommy mo, nangako ako sa kaniya na hindi kita pababayaan. I was going to protect you. And I didn't."

I wiped my tears. "You were friends with the wrong people, Dad. You weren't like this when Mom was alive."

Dad stared at me. "You know the only thing you got from your mother aside from your looks?" he asked.

"What?"

"Your morals," he said. "That need to stand up for what's right. You stayed good. You stayed brave. She would've been proud of you, Winona. I didn't deserve a daughter like you… but I'm grateful I had you long enough to see the person you became."

Kinagat ko ang labi ko.

We used to never talk about Mommy. It's like an unwritten rule. So hearing this from Dad, I felt like a wound in my heart opened up.

"That boy, Ayasaki came up to me," he said.

"Akiro," I said his name.

Dad nodded. "He talked to me like a man who had every right to hate me but he didn't."

My heart squeezed. "Pinatawad ka niya, Dad."

"He did it not for my sake, but for yours. Because he knew you'd carry the weight if he didn't," sabi niya. "He's a good man, Winona. Better than I ever was to you."

I sighed. Hindi ako maka-angal doon.

He caressed my hand. "Marry him. You deserve someone who isn't like your father, anak."

"Dad, please," umiwas ako ng tingin.

I stood up after a while. Dad looked up at me while he sat in a cold metal chair. He wasn't angry. He wasn't upset. He sat there like he accepted his faith.

"I'm still not ready to forgive you, Dad," I spoke truthfully. "I'm not there yet. But I'm here. And that's all I can give right now."

Daddy nodded. He understood. He understood very well.

Kabanata 39

Everything went back to normal for people. It was different to me because I had to. I had no choice.

I went back to Manila for my work. I went to work like nothing traumatic had happened. The news was still all over. Some are happy that they were caught. Some are angry for the money they stole, the projects they wasted, and they're angry for what had been done. And I would too, if I were in their shoes.

Akiro stayed to finish the things about the incident. He's coordinating with my Tito and the authorities. He also said that Nicklaus was helping him since he's a lawyer himself.

He promised to go to Manila after. Hindi ko naman siya minamadali. I know he has been doing all the work for me. He didn't want me to worry about anything.

"Doc?" Didrei called me.

Kumurap ako. "Uh, sorry. I guess I'll see you on Monday?"

She paused. "You said you're not available on Monday, doc."

"Yes, yes, sorry," I cleared my throat. "I have a wedding to attend."

"Yes, you said that earlier."

"When did I say I'd see you again?"

"Wednesday..." she looked at me, curiously. "Are you okay, doc?"

I smiled and fixed my white coat. "Yes, I apologize. See you on Wednesday, Didrei."

I watched her leave my office.

Hinilot ko ang sentido ko at binagsak ang ulo sa lamesa. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang problema. I lifted my head and touched my arm where I got shot. I felt a gauze on it. The doctor said that I should clean it every now and then. Medyo masakit pa din pero hindi na gaano.

Shannon said it's too early to work. She said that I might not be okay. Alam ko iyon. I'm still in shock. I'm still trying to process everything.

I left for work and after a week of my so-called vacation, a lot of things happened. My father's in jail. It's on national TV. I was kidnapped by politics and the general people. I was shot.

It's not an easy thing to process. In fact, I do need therapy myself!

Pero ayaw ko. Ayaw kong huminto muna. If I take a rest or even be alone for an hour, my head will play with those ugly things that have happened. Ayaw ko iyon mangyari. As much as possible, I will make myself busy.

"Doc?" sumilip si Sam sa office ko.

I checked my wrist watch and saw that it's already six in the evening. Magsasarado na.

"You can go. I'll lock up."

"Sigurado ka, doc?" she asked. "Marami pa bang gagawin?"

I sighed. "Tatapusin ko lang ito, Sam. You can go home. I'll take care of it."

She nodded. "Sige po."

Tumahimik ang paligid nang umuwi na ang secretary ko. The building was also silent. I cannot hear anything but the paging of pages I'm reviewing. I reviewed some of the files of my clients, arranged them alphabetically, and checked every single mistake to be corrected.

Hindi ako nakuntento. Tumayo ako at kinuha ang walis. I started sweeping, wiping, dusting, and even in my comfort room.

It was nine when I stared at the time. Umupo ako sa sahig habang tinitignan ang mga dumi sa dingding. I grabbed the cleaning cloth and started wiping the wall.

I only stopped when the door outside opened. Humigpit ang hawak ko sa panglinis ko. I got scared. I remembered the bad people with guns. They might come for me. They might hurt me again.

I stood up.

The doorknob to my office moved. Bumukas iyon. Nalaglag ang hawak hawak kong tela. The door opened and someone walked in.

My mouth hung when I saw Akiro. He was wearing his normal suit and tie. Nagkatinginan kami. Kumunot ang noo niya nang makita ang mga panglinis na nakakalat. He clenched his jaw.

I cleared my throat. "What are you doing here? How is everything with Dad?"

"We're still on it," he sighed. "What are you doing?"

"I'm cleaning," sabi ko.

"In this hour? Shouldn't you be home?"

I picked up the cloth and didn't talk. I sat on the floor and started wiping the wall again.

"Mahal..." he whispered.

I felt him behind me. Mas binilisan ko ang pagkukuskos sa dingding. I sprayed water on parts I don't even think are dirty. I just wanted to clean it.

He held my hand lightly. He was squatting behind me. I felt his knees on my side. For some reason, I was so eager to clean everything as if I hated the dirty wall.

Nangilid ang luha ko. "Lilinisan ko lang ito."

"It's not dirty, baby," he said. "Give me that, please. You'll hurt your arm."

Umiling ako. Pinunasan ko ang luha ko sa likod ng kamay ko. I sobbed. I didn't even mean to cry. I don't know why I'm crying.

"Tell me what's wrong. I'll listen," mahinang sabi ni Akiro.

"The wall, Akiro! Madumi 'yong dingding, okay? I'm cleaning it! I have to clean it all!"

"Let's take a rest—"

"Ayaw ko!" umiling ako. "Because then, I'll remember it! I'll remember everything."

Akiro paused. Hindi siya nagsalita sa likod ko. I felt his difficulty breathing. He held my hand and took the cloth from my hand. Bumagsak ang tingin ko sa kalat na ginawa ko. My clothes are dirty. I'm a mess.

He kissed my temple. "What happened was too much," he said.

My breath shuddered. "I'm... I'm fine, Kiro."

"You're not," he said. "And it's okay. You don't have to be okay. You don't have to pull yourself together. Let's not be fine together."

Hot tears fell from my eyes. This time, it was comforting.

Hindi ako sumagot. We stayed that way for minutes. He let me be silent. He respected my silence. And I liked it.

"I want to go home now..." I finally said.

Akiro drove to my condo. Wala sa amin ang nagsalita. He glanced at me now and then but he never talked. I know he has a lot to say but he would rather not open his mouth.

Dumiretso ako sa kwarto ko habang naiwan si Akiro sa baba. I left my door open just in case he would come in. I showered and went to bed immediately. Hindi ko na namalayan ang pagpasok ni Akiro dahil mabilis akong hinila ng antok.

I woke up with his hands hugging me tight in the morning.

Nauna akong magising sa kaniya. His eyes opened a bit. Walang suot na pang-itaas habang nakayakap sa akin. Umupo ako sa kama. Nagkatinginan kami ni Akiro.

Nangungusap ang mga mata niya sa akin. He wanted to say something. Bumuka ang bibig niya pero walang lumabas doon. He clenched his jaw. I stood up and went straight to the bathroom to prepare.

"So, he's just like living with you now?" Shannon asked when she dropped by my office. Kasama niya si Rex na hindi ko alam kung nangungumusta or kumukuha ng chismis.

I sighed. "No. He has a house in Forbes Park."

"Forbes?" Rex asked surprisingly. "Gaano ba kayaman 'yon?"

"Mayaman pa sayo, sakin, sa ating lahat!" Shannon said. "May mansyon pala doon, bakit nakikisiksik sa condo mo?"

Rex raised his eyebrow. "Kayo na ba ulit?"

I didn't talk. I couldn't answer.

Akiro has been sleeping in my bed for a few days now. Sa ilang araw na iyon, parang dalawang sentence pa lang ang nasabi namin sa isa't isa.

He would drive me here and pick me up after his work. He'd prepare food for me, breakfast, lunch, or even dinner. He'd stop by sometimes to check on me and my schedule. Other than that, we're not speaking to each other.

"Don't tell me you're still in love with my cousin?" Shannon asked Rex.

Nakatingin lamang ako sa computer ko.

"I'm just asking her," Rex defended. "Shit things happened to her after that Japanese spy came home. What do you want me to think?"

"Why would he want to harm Winona?"

"Ewan ko, Shan. He looks dangerous to me!"

Shannon rolled her eyes. "Of course, he will look dangerous to you. He kicked your ass once!"

"Huh? Kailan!"

I turned to them. "Thanks for stopping by pero may pasyente ako mamaya..."

"Kailan, Shan?" iritadong sabi ni Rex.

"Wala!" bulyaw ni Shan. "Winona, papuntahin mo iyon para sipain niya ulit nguso nito at makaalala!"

Both of them stopped when we heard a knock. Pumasok si Sam bitbit ang sangkatutak na pagkain. Nilapag niya iyon sa mesa kasabay ng pagturo niya sa sticky note.

She smiled, almost giggling. Pinanood namin siyang umalis na tumatawa.

"Ano 'yan, letson? Kanino galing?" Shannon stood up.

We all looked at the note and read it.

Eat plenty. I miss you already.

- A

"A? Akiro?" Shannon read. "Smitten. Capital S."

Rex sighed. "So, kayo na?"

"Ano ang nakikita mo, Rex? Does it look like something that a plumber would send her?"

Hinilot ko ang sentido ko. "I'm sorry, guys. I hope I can entertain you more but I really need to work."

Both of them looked at me. Umirap si Shannon kay Rex at tumayo. Rex sighed, he wasn't letting go of that glare at my cousin. Mukhang hanggang sa labas ay hindi niya palalagpasin iyon.

Rex looked at me with full concern. "Please take care of yourself, Win. You probably had a lot of trauma from what happened. Call me when you need me. Anytime."

Humalukipkip si Shannon. "Oh, gosh. What are you, her backburner or something?"

"Shan..." I warned. "Thank you, Rex, for the concern. I'll keep that in mind."

Nagpaalam na din si Shannon sa akin.

For a while, I kind of forgot my worries. But that's just a second pause. Pag-alis nila Shannon, para ulit akong pinagbagsakan ng langit at lupa. It was like this every day.

I use work as a distraction. I keep myself busy just so I don't think about the traumas I had. Just for me to focus on other things.

It's like putting on a pair of headphones and setting it to the loudest volume just for me not to hear the noise. To not hear the reality, the fear, the trauma, the past.

As a doctor, I've met so many patients who cope through distraction, who bury themselves in noise just so the silence won't swallow them. But I never thought I'd become one of them.

I know exactly what I'm doing. It's avoidance, a trauma response disguised as productivity. I keep myself busy, almost obsessively, because the alternative is sitting with the memories I'm not ready to face.

Akiro looked at me with his weary eyes. Nagkatinginan lamang kami pagkatapos ay dumiretso na ako sa sasakyan niya.

Akiro cooked food while I was in the shower. Bumaba ako at naamoy ko kaagad iyon. It was seafood. I saw him plating the food on the table counter. Nagkatinginan kami ni Akiro.

"What's that?" I touched my stomach.

He placed the plate in front of me. "Shrimp."

Dumuwal ako. I covered my mouth. Akiro froze as I rushed towards the sink. There was something about the smell of the seafood that made me want to throw up. Malansa. Mabaho. Hindi ko kaya amuyin.

Akiro positioned himself behind me and caressed my back. "What's wrong? Are you sick?" he touched my forehead to check.

I gargled the water before I looked at him with my watery eyes. "Take it away."

"What?"

"The food!" I almost panicked. "I don't like it. Take it away, Kiro!"

He clenched his jaw as he took the seafood away. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang ginawa niya doon. He probably gave it to the lobby or something.

He came back after a while. Nakaupo na ako sa sofa at nanonood habang yakap yakap ang hita ko. Nagmamasid ang mga mata niya sa akin. He was like observing something.

He sat beside me and touched my leg. "What do you want to eat?"

Umiling ako habang nakatingin pa din sa TV.

He sighed. "We have to eat, baby..."

I looked at him. "Maybe you can make the sushi you did for me before."

Umangat ang kilay niya ng kaunti. "The sushi I did for you five years ago?"

I nodded.

He licked his lips. A ghost of a smile was on his lips. Nagtataka ko siyang tinignan. He stood up. Parang may bumuhay sa kaniya.

We eat the sushi he made at the table. He makes sure I eat. Isang oras niya iyon ginawa. Isang oras din ako naghintay. Kaya naman halos ubusin ko iyon lahat. Akiro watched me as I finished every bit of the sushi he made.

After dinner, Akiro washed the dishes and cleaned the tables. When I realized that he didn't want me to do anything, umakyat na ako. I brushed my teeth and lay in bed. Wala pang ilang minuto ay nakuha ko na kaagad ang antok ko.

Naramdaman ko ang paghiga ni Akiro sa tabi ko. Hinalikan ni Akiro ang buhok ko. I smelled fresh shower gel from him. My shower gel. Later on, his hand snaked towards my tummy.

I didn't move.

He caressed my tummy softly. Slowly. Like doing a lullaby. He kept kissing my hair between his touch. Mariin akong pumikit.

Hindi ako nagsalita. Hindi ako gumalaw.

We stayed like that until we both fell asleep.

Kabanata 40

It was Dheia's wedding.

She was expecting me to attend, which is why I couldn't resist. I'm one of the bridesmaids, too.

Dheia and I weren't that close. I guess she considered me because of Akiro. She shouldn't, though. I wouldn't mind naman kung iba ang ipares sa kaniya.

I already wore the dress Dheia sent us. It's a beige motif wedding. My dress is a tube with a slit up my legs. I tied my hair into a messy kind of bun and did light makeup. Lumabas ako sa closet at nakita si Akiro.

He was waiting for me on the bed, wearing a black tuxedo. He fixed his hair a bit. Shannon was right. He really looked like an anime or a webtoon character on the loose. His tie was a bit loose.

Lumapit ako para ayusin iyon. He shifted on his seat. I stood in front of him as he looked up at me from sitting on the bed. His eyes dropped down on my stomach. Umigting ang panga niya at para bang may hinahanap doon.

"Do you still feel sick?" Akiro asked.

I swallowed. "I'm okay. I'm probably just tired last night. I took it out on the seafood."

Akiro nodded. "Do you want anything?"

"What?"

"If you're craving anything..."

"Why would I crave? We just had breakfast."

Hindi nagsalita si Akiro. I sighed.

I cleared my throat as I stepped back. Maayos na iyong necktie niya. "Let's go. We'll be late."

Tsaka lamang siya kumilos nang tumalikod ako.

Dheia's wedding will be in La Union. A beach wedding on a private island. Matagal ang byahe papunta doon. Good thing, the wedding will be held in a sun set. Kaya hindi ako gaanong nagmamadali.

Akiro was silent as usual in the car. He would glance at me and ask me if I needed a drink or something. Iiling lamang ako.

Nakarating kami doon ng alas kwatro. Twenty- minute boat ride from there is a private island where the wedding and the reception will be held. There willalso beo accommodation there so that we won't need to book into a hotel.

Nakita ko na kaagad ang malaking yatch kung saan kami sasakay patungo sa kasal. I saw people and music from there.

Akiro snaked his armsaroundn my waist as he guided me up on theyachth. Hinila niya alo ng kaunti para bumulong.

"We'll leave if you're uncomfortable, okay..." he whispered.

Lumunok ako. "I won't."

"Baka mahilo ka..."

Matalim kong tinignan si Akiro. "I'm fine, Akiro. I'm not sick."

He clicked his jaw.

I immediately saw Blair as soon as we landed on the yacht. Nasa tabi niya si Nicklaus na nakapulupot ang kamay sa baywang ng asawa. She's wearing a beige dress like mine, only it's a halter top.

"Winona!" Blair saw me. "You're so pretty. Oh my gosh."

Nicklaus nodded at me. Tinapik niya si Akiro at binigyan ng nakakaasar na ngisi.

"Thank you," I said. "You, too!"

Blair snaked her hand on my arm. Parang labag sa loob ni Akiro ang pag-alis ko sa kamay niya.

"Let's meet the girls!" Blair said.

Nicklaus chuckled as he tapped Akiro's chest. "Kumalma ka. Hindi 'yan itatangay ng hangin."

I looked back at Akiro. He nodded to me like I had asked a permission from him. Ako naman itong tsaka lamang sumama ng kusa kay Blair nang payagan ako ni Akiro. What am I? His hostage or something?

Pinanood ako ni Akiro habang sinusuot niya ang itim niyang salamin. Humalukipkip siya habang nakadiretso ang mukha sa akin na humiwalay sa kaniya upang bumati sa mga kaibigan niya. Labas yata sa kaliwang tenga ang mga sinasabi ng kaibigan niya.

"Hi, Win!" Jackie greeted. "I'm glad you came."

I smiled. "Ofcourse. Late lang pero nandito naman..."

Nakarating kami sa loob ng yatch. I saw Quinnzel with the coordinator. She's yelling about something. Natataranta ang mga coordinator sa kaniya.

She saw me and smiled. "Winona! You look absolutely gorgeous!"

Bumeso ako. "You, too."

"Kiro already told us you guys might not come, so we're really happy you're here," Quinn said.

Nilingon ko siya. "He said that?"

She sighed. "Well, after what happened, I know it's still hard for you—"

Jackie shushed her. "H'wag daw sabi ni hapon."

Ngumiwi si Quinnzel. "Ah, yeah. Kiro told us not to bug you about it. Don't worry, we're here for you."

Sinapo ni Jackie ang noo niya. Tumawa lamang si Blair. I saw Penny and Phia talking about something. They all went to me the second they saw me.

I know the look in their eyes. I know that they feel bad for me. It's all over the news, more like all over Baguio since it happened there. Of course, they knew about it.

Penny smiled at me. "You couldn't attend the rehearsal, right? You can just follow our pace."

"You will be right behind Phia, Win," Quinnzel said. "And then, you'll just follow where she sits."

"Okay," I nodded.

"Wait, parang mali na pagtabihin ko si Riley at Allen." Quinnzel realized something.

Humalakhak si Jackie. "I-partner nga ako sa mokong na 'yon, mali na, eh."

"Bakit kasi hindi niya dinala iyong girlfriend niya?" Blair asked.

Umirap si Quinnzel. "Hindi nga niya girlfriend. Ayaw sa kaniya 'non."

"Kasi hindi siya Chinese?" I butted in.

Quinnzel nodded. Nilingon namin si Blair noong humagalpak ang tawa.

"Jackie, do you remember that time in high school?" she wiped her tears from laughter. "When Allen invited her to prom?"

"Ni-reject siya?" Phia asked.

Blair nodded. "He was so broken-hearted!"

"Nag-inquire sa ancestry.com," Jackie added. "Baka raw may Chinese blood siya somewhere. Baka daw one percent man lang."

Penny gasped and chuckled. "He paid for that?"

"Oo," Jackie said. "Pero wala, zero percent ang kumag!"

Quinnzel shook her head out of disappointment and laughter. "Please, Phia, ang asawa mo. Ayaw kong sumaway ng mga kumag ngayon. It's like high school all over again with them sitting together."

We all laughed. Tumigil lang noong dumating si Allen. Umakbay siya sa akin habang nakangisi.

"What's up, guys?"

I rolled my eyes and tapped his hand on my shoulder. "Easy on that shoulder, Allen."

"Ay, gagi, sorry," tumawa siya. "Muscle memory ko kasi umakbay kapag may magandang babae."

"Tangina..." iling ni Jackie.

Quinn raised her eyebrow. "Careful, Allen. Nasa dagat tayo. H'wag mong hamakin na lumangoy papunta sa kasal."

She gave me a bouquet of flowers. From her dress style, I realized that she's the maid of honor. She's doing more as a maid of honor because I think she's also a coordinator. Or it's just a thought.

Nahanap ako kaagad ni Akiro nang nakarating kami sa isla. My eyes wandered over a beautiful white sand island. The sand was soft and pale, glowing under the orange sunset. The shoreline stretched endlessly, untouched and quiet, as if the entire island existed just for the wedding.

There was a wooden pathway leading from the dock to the main area. Lanterns lined both sides, slowly lighting up one by one as the sun dipped lower. At the end of the path stood a small private villa.

The sunset washed everything in gold, pink, and orange.

Bago ang villa, nakaset up na ang malaking tent doon. I saw flowers decorated everywhere. A white carpet and a bunch of chairs. Dried palms arranged with fresh florals. Fairy lights strung overhead that looked like tiny stars waiting for nightfall.

"Wow!" everyone gasped.

Sumunod kami kila Phia na dumiretso na papunta sa venue. Akiro couldn't get his hands off my waist. Para bang naka-glue na iyon doon.

"Great work, Quinn," Penny said. "Gosh! I didn't know you'd make a great wedding coordinator."

Akiro held my hand and placed it on his biceps as we started positioning for the entrance.

Allen tss-ed. "Nakita mo ba 'yong team niya? Umiiyak na kasi sobrang bossy ng boss nila."

"Shut up, Allen," Quinnzel glared. "Everyone shut up and follow the line. Hindi ko kayo dadamputin isa-isa kapag sumablay 'tong entrance!"

Primo combed his hair backwards and couldn't help but laugh.

Pumaswit si Riley na nasa harapan namin ni Akiro. "Nakakapressure naman maglakad."

"If you trip, I will personally shove you back to the yacht!" Quinnzel said to Riley.

"Grabe. Ano ba website ng event coordinator na 'to? Rate ko ng zero." Allen added.

The wedding started after a few minutes. Hawak hawak ko ang braso ni Akiro. Hindi kami naka-attend ng rehearsal. Though, Quinnzel already told me what to do, she didn't tell anything to Akiro.

We were supposed to separate in the middle. He'll sit with the groom's men. And I will sit with the bride's maid. But Akiro didn't let go of my hand.

Nanlalaki ang mga mata ni Quinnzel habang nasa harapan at pinapanood si Akiro na sumunod sa akin sa upuan ko. Ngumiwi ako at bahagyang kinabahan sa tingin.

"Dumbass," I heard Nicklaus cough and say the word.

Nilingon ko si Akiro. "You were supposed to sit with the boys."

"I know," he sighed and clicked his jaw. "I just don't want to."

Umawang ang labi ko.

The wedding song played as Dheia walked. Everyone looked at her. She was tearing up. She looked beautiful. Her gown perfectly showed her curves and innocence. I smiled as my lips shook.

I've never been to a wedding before. I never thought I'd tear up in a wedding but I did. I wiped my tears as I watched the bride with the groom in the middle. He wiped Dheia's tears gently and whispered something.

Akiro touched my hand. Kinagat ko ang labi ko. My finger moved and touched his. We intertwined our hands together like it was our secret conversation. Like he promised the same thing as the vows they bid.

Masaya at mabilis na natapos ang mga pangyayari. I enjoyed watching them tie a knot. I enjoyed every single thing about it. I never thought I would.

The reception was held inside the villa. There's a beautifully designed hall for the reception.

"Congratulations to our newlyweds!" the host rejoiced as we applauded for the new couple.

Naupo kami sa mahabang lamesa. I sat with Akiro's friends. Nasa gitna ako ni Allen at Akiro. Maingay sila kumpara sa ibang lamesa. They were really active in everything that the host says.

Akiro would laugh and tease his friends, too. Nangingiti ako tuwing siya naman ang pinagtritripan.

Umiikot ang alak sa lamesa namin. Phia who was in front of me, placed a shot of whiskey on my table. Nanuyo ang lalamunan ko habang tinitignan ang alak. I swallowed hard. I felt the food that I had eaten come rushing up my throat.

Sinapo ko ang bibig ko.

Akiro clenched his jaw and grabbed the drink. Ininom niya iyon.

"Oh, Win? Are you okay?" Phia asked. "Is there something with the alcohol?"

Umiling ako. Hindi pa din maayos ang pakiramdam. I felt like throwing up. Nakita kong kumuha si Akiro ng tubig para sa akin.

"Sus. H'wag ka makinig kay hapon, Winona," Allen placed another shot on my table. "Minsan na tayong sinakop ng mga tao n'yan."

Akiro was pissed. Kinuha niya iyon at binalik kay Allen. "She will not be drinking tonight."

"Stop being so KJ, Kiro. Let her drink!" Quinnzel said. "May after party pa bukas! Hindi ko hahayaang kami lang ni Jackie ang magharap."

I sipped on the water and stood up. "I'm sorry. Restroom lang."

"I'll go with you," Akiro tried to stand up but I stopped him.

"It's okay," I said. "The speech will start soon."

I rushed to the restroom, leaving Akiro there. I threw up everything I ate. Para akong nanghina. My dress is all ruined now. I had to clean up and remove the stains on my dress. Pinatuyo ko iyon.

I wiped my mouth with a clean tissue and stared at my face. The smell of alcohol was reeking. Iniisip ko palang, naduduwal na ako agad.

What's wrong with me?

A cubicle opened. I saw Quinnzel coming out of there. She looked at me, a bit shocked and worried.

"Are you okay? Sorry, I thought it was someone else."

Tumango ako at mahinang ngumiti. "I'm fine. It's probably just the stress and all."

She smiled at me and proceeded to the sink. She washed her hands. Tumawa siya sa kaniyang sarili.

"Yes, well, don't worry too much. The first trimester is tough and sensitive," she closed the faucet. "But I'm sure Akiro's pretty handy."

"What?"

She smiled. "I mean, I can't imagine how scared you were especially because you're pregnant. I'm sorry. I know you probably don't want to talk about what happened. We were all worried."

Kumurap kurap ako. Hindi ako kaagad nakapagsalita.

Quinn sighed. "Dheia was worried if you two could still come. Baka kasi hindi pa okay 'yong sugat niyo."

"My..." I cleared my throat. "My shoulder's fine now."

"How about Akiro's back?"

Kumunot ang noo ko. "Akiro's what?"

"'Yong likod niya."

"What's wrong with his back?"

Kumurap kurap si Quinnzel. Her mouth went round. "Oh, you didn't know..."

"What's going on, Quinnzel?"

"He got shot while saving you," she said. "If the angle were different, it would've been critical. Ayaw niyang umatras kahit tinamaan na siya. He wanted to save you. It's romantic, sure, pero… sinong matinong tao ang ganon?"

I licked my lips. Sinapo ko ang ulo ko. "I can't believe it."

"Let’s just be grateful you’re both safe. I’m sure he didn’t tell you because he didn’t want you to stress or affect your pregnancy."

"Quinn," I called her softly. Umiling ako. "I'm not pregnant."

She stared at me. Kumurap kurap siya. "Are you sure?"

Umiling ako. Kinagat ko ang labi ko at umatras. "I... I need some air. Excuse me."

I ran out of the venue.

Tumigil lamang ako sa dalampasigan, malapit sa yatch kung saan kami sumakay kanina. The wind was blowing along with the waves that kept on crashing the shore.

My chest tightened. Sharp, sudden. Para akong sinampal ng hangin.

I tried to take a breath, pero parang may nakadagan sa dibdib ko. It felt too tight, too narrow, like my lungs forgot how to work. The air wouldn’t go in. The air wouldn’t go out.

Paresthesia, my mind supplied automatically. Palpitations, sympathetic nervous system hyperactivation, classic panic response.

Of course, my brain would diagnose me while I was falling apart.

"Stop, please..." I sat on the sand. I grabbed my small clutch. Naghanap ako ng anti-depressant pill doon pero wala akong makita.

My purse fell and my stuff spilled. Out of all things, I picked the most unusual one. It was a Japanese omamori dark navy with gold embroidery. Omamori are never supposed to be opened, the paper prayer inside is sacred. You keep it close, and the blessing stays with you. You give it only to someone you trust deeply.

Akiro gave this to me.

I sobbed. Hindi ko alam kung bakit pero umiyak lamang ako. I cried as people cheered inside. Sumabay ang luha ko sa hampas ng tubig sa dalampasigan.

"Winona," someone called.

Hindi ko na kinailangan na lumingon. Tumayo ako at tinignan si Akiro. His expression was tight. Igting ang mga panga niya at nangungusap ang mga mata.

Sumugod ako sa kaniya. I grabbed his shirt and pulled him. Hinampas ko ang dibdib niya nang sinubukan niyang hulihin ang kamay ko.

"You were shot!" I cried. "You almost died!"

He clicked his jaw. "Who told you that?"

"Bakit hindi mo sinabi? You could've died there, Akiro!"

He held my wrist tight. "Yeah, well, I'd rather die saving you, Winona. You think I was thinking of myself? I didn’t even feel the bullet. I didn't feel anything except the panic that I might lose you. I'd take that damn bullet a thousand times. Hindi ako aalis doon na hindi kita kasama."

I sobbed. Humigpit ang hawak ko sa omamori na hawak ko.

"Why do you love me this much, Kiro? All I did was to hurt you, again and again..."

Akiro licked his lips. Gumapang ang kamay niya sa pisngi ko. His lips were red like he had been biting them for a long while. Namumungay ang mga mata niya sa akin.

"Hurt doesn't feel hurt when it's you."

My mouth hung.

What did I do to deserve this? What is the good thing that I did to deserve him?

I opened my hand. Bumaba ang tingin namin parehas sa bagay na nasa kamay ko. My tears wouldn't stop falling. My lips shaked. Tinignan ko si Akiro.

He bit his lips. "You still have this, huh?"

Tumango ako. "Marry me."

Tumaas ang kilay ni Akiro. His lips curved into a small smile. Humikbi pa ako lalo nang ngumiti siya dahil sa proposal ko. It sounded more like a command than a question to me.

"Are you proposing?" he asked softly.

"Yes, damn it, Akiro!"

He chuckled in his low voice. "Too late," kinuha niya ang omamori sa kamay ko. He opened it. I gasped a little because it was not to be opened.

He pulled out something inside. I saw a dangling diamond ring. It shone through the moon and the reflection of the sea. The diamond was large.

He bit his lips and grabbed my hand. "I already proposed before."

I watched as he slipped the diamond ring on my finger. It was perfect. It fit perfectly. It was really made for me.

Nanginginig ang kamay ko. "You're going to marry me?"

He cupped my face and kissed me between my sobs. It felt like a dream. It felt like one of the dreams I had before. For a moment, in this moment, I felt happiness.

"Without a fucking doubt I will. You never really had to ask," he whispered and kissed my forehead deeply. "God, you don't know how happy I am..."

Tinitigan ko muli ang kamay ko.

He chuckled. "You can stop staring now, Winona. I'm getting scared you're taking it back."

Kumunot ang noo ko. "This was inside that after all this time?"

"I'm more worried you haven't opened this."

"It wasn't to be opened! You told me it has a sacred something inside!"

He chuckled.

Hindi pa ako nakakabawi doon pero yumakap na si Akiro sa likod ko. I wiped my tears as his face was on my shoulder. In front of us was the night view of the sea. I couldn't stop staring at my hand now.

I'm engaged.

Akiro's hand crawled on my stomach. Tumigil ako saglit.

"Akiro," I called.

"Hmm?"

I took a deep sigh. "I think I'm pregnant."

For a moment, the world seemed to stop. The music, the laughter, even the waves, everything fell silent. Fear bubbled in my chest. What if he changed his mind? What if he… didn't want this anymore?

He kissed my shoulder. "I know."

"What?" nilingon ko siya ng kaunti.

He started swaying me while a love song was blasted from the venue inside. "I know..."

"You're still marrying me?"

"Even more."

Ngumuso ako. "Baka iniisip mo, pinipikot kita."

"I don't care," he shamelessly chuckled. "It's not like I didn't willingly fooled by you before, baby."

Umikot ang mata ko.

"I think the pastor's still here. Do you want to get married now?"

"Kiro..." natatawang sabi ko.

"Sorry. I just can't wait to marry you."

I smiled. I rested my head in his chest. The panic stopped. My worries stopped. It felt light. So light that I wanted to cry.

I had sworn a lot of things in my life. I swore years ago that I'd never fall in love in that place. I swore I'd

never let anyone get close enough to matter. I swore I’d never fall for Akiro. I swore I’d only fool him, play my part, and keep my heart locked away. I swore I’d lie… and lie only.

But I realized that maybe Akiro wasn't the only one who was fooled by my lies.

I did, too.

Because even after all of it, here I was. Completely undone, willingly, irrevocably, by him. By Akiro.

He had chosen me with all the lies, all the betrayals, and all the hurt. He had chosen me every single day. And he's still.

I realized then that love didn’t have to be perfect to be real. That it didn’t have to make sense to be true. And maybe the places I swore I’d never stay, the moments I swore I’d never risk... could still hold something beautiful if it was right.

Epilogue

Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response.

That was Frankl says.

It means that no matter what happens to you, there’s always a tiny moment before you react, and in that moment, you get to choose who you want to be. You choose your response. And that choice shapes your life.

Some people never notice that space.

But I’ve built my whole life around that space studying it, guarding it, shaping it. Maybe because I grew up knowing how dangerous it is when people don’t know they have a choice. When fear reacts for them, when anger speaks for them, when pain decides for them.

I always think that the mind is a battlefield that most people never learn to name.

And I want to try to understand the silence between cause and effect... that thin, fragile pause where a person decides who they are.

"Bola mamaya," Riley said to me and laughed. "Girlfriend mo ba 'yon?"

Nilingon ko ang tinutukoy niya. Darleen walked away after giving me some of her notes from a class I couldn't attend. She even went to the gym where I worked just to give me her notebook that I never asked for.

"Hindi."

"Ah," tumango si Riley. "G ka? Bola. Tapos inom."

"Tss," umiling ako. "Broken hearted ka lang, gago. Daig mo pa babae. Clingy."

"Gago!" nairita siya kaagad.

Madalas ako magwork-out. I usually spend most of my hours in the gym. I go here after class and almost every day. That's when I considered coaching. I could use some cash.

The news sparked that a former congressman would run against my father in this election. Narinig ko lamang sa mga kaibigan. It's not that I don't care about politics. I do. It's just that I didn't care much about my father's whereabouts.

"Just leave him, Ma," I said. "Go back to Japan. It's better for you there."

I heard my mother's groan on the other line. "You know I can't do that, Aki. It's not that easy."

Nairita ako.

"How can it not be easy? You're not happy with him. You're not happy here."

"Come home, and I'll be happy," Mama said. "Apologize to your father—"

"No," mabilis na sabi ko.

"Akiro..."

I clicked my neck and closed my eyes. "I know he's making you do this. I know about the election."

Mama sighed. "Akiro, please. I'm not happy with you living alone. Your father agreed that he would pay for your tuition this year so you could stop working at that gym. Just go home. Talk to your father."

Damn it.

"Drop it, Ma." matigas na sabi ko. "I'm not coming home."

My father is an angry man.

When I was younger, I confused it with a natural reaction of anger and frustration. I saw and watched the shouting go on and on. Sometimes, it stops, pauses for a while, and when they argue, it continues. Until it started getting physical.

The moment I saw how my father slapped my mother across her face, I didn't hesitate to stand up. I broke what Frankl says. But what's the matter? My father does. My father does all the time.

"Don't you ever touch her again," I warned.

My father looked at me with his lips bleeding from my knuckles. "You got some nerve hitting your father, Akiro."

"The same nerve you got from hitting my mother."

"Akiro!" My mother called me, scared. "Stop it. Apologize to your father now!"

Kumunot ang noo ko. "Apologize for what? Fucking what?"

Father grabbed my neckline. Humiyaw si Mama. Nanginginig ang kamay ni Papa habang kwinwkwelyuhan ako. The cries of my mother weren't enough to hide my anger.

"You're still living under my roof and you dare lay a hand on me?"

I pushed him away. "No problem. I'll leave your fucking roof."

Ngumisi si Papa. "Aren't you funny? You think you'll live out there without my money, you ungrateful piece of shit."

"Toshio!"

I clenched my jaw. "Let's see about that."

I don’t want to become the kind of man who raises his voice just to be heard. I don’t want my kids flinching the way I used to. I don’t want the woman I love walking on eggshells around me.

I don’t want a house where fear lives louder than love. I may have his blood, but I will not be his reflection.

I left home and rented my own apartment. Sakto lang ang commission ko sa gym para sa tuition at renta. My mom sent help but I refused to receive it. I would lie if I said that it's not hard. But it's tolerable than living in that hell.

"I'm Winona Jean Lopez. I'm 22 and I am pleased to be with you until the end of the semester."

Umangat ang tingin ko mula sa pinupuslit kong cellphone. Her hair was auburn. It framed her face in these soft waves, almost too perfect, like the kind you only see in dolls you’re not supposed to touch. But she was real. Too real.

Her eyes are wide, clear and a little guarded. Mapungay kahit hindi sinasadya. Mahahaba ang pilik-mata niya, at sa tuwing kumukurap siya, may munting anino na gumuguhit sa pisngi niya.

She's pretty. Almost prettier than anyone in this room. She wasn’t aware of how many people were watching her. Or maybe she was, and she hated it.

Sa iba, maganda lang siya. Sa akin, delikado.

"I'd love to come too. What is Amper?" she butted in on a conversation between Darleen and me.

"It's a bar, Winona. Do you drink?" Darleen asked.

Umangat ang kilay ko at naghintay din ng sagot sa kaniya. I don't have specific types of women. People expect that because I'm Japanese, I like Japanese women. Hindi ko alam. I guess, I just like a woman.

"We've only known each other for three seconds and you're coming with me to a bar?" I asked her.

I watched her expressions carefully. Bawat pagkunot ng noo, paggalaw ng mata, pagsimangot ng labi. I bit my tongue to stop smiling.

She's from Manila. A Manila girl. Damn it. It's obvious. Her phone is updated, she has decorated her iPad with pink things I don't understand and even her bag is a designer.

Iniisip ko na kaagad kapag liligawan ko, gusto nito mga mamahalin. Anak ng. Ano ba ang iniisip ko?

Lopez.

Felix Lopez. I heard of it. It can't be just a coincidence. Both of our fathers are competing with each other. The news flashed and now she's here, in my class. She wants something from me.

Patibong.

"Si Akiro, UC Psych din, Winona. Baka kilala mo," Allen said. I watched her sit at our table with my friends.

Iritado ako. What the heck does she want? Allen? Me? If she wants something, she should go straight to me. Bakit sasama pa kay Allen?

"I'm not really into dating right now," she said after a long while of teasing her to Allen.

Sumimsim ako sa alak na nakangiti.

"You'd want me to assume that enrolling here, getting close to me, is some kind of cute little accident?" I asked her.

"Why would you think I'd make an effort in leaving a wonderful life in Manila just to come here and what? Make papansin to you?"

Damn.

If her face was what first caught my attention, her personality was what kept me orbiting her long after she stopped looking my way.

Her personality is strong. She'd rather be called rude or blunt than be dishonest. She doesn't dress the truth to make it pretty. She lets it be exactly what it is. And somehow that makes her even more beautiful.

Pero hindi maalis sa isipan ko ang mainis. Kaagad kong pinagsisihan na pagsabihan siya ng ganoon. She became distant to me. She rolls her eyes at me often. I kind of like it.

"Kung liligawan ko 'yon, tingin mo, sasagutin ako?" Allen asked one time.

Tumawa si Dheia. "Hindi ka na natuto."

"I like her. Maganda tapos masungit. Type ko 'yong ganoon."

Sumandal ako sa inuupuan ko. I don't think so. Uunahan ko siya kung ganoon. I smirked at myself.

Winona stands up for herself every time Darleen picks on her. She knows where she stands. She knows what to say. She knows what's right and wrong. She has morals. And wins every time.

"Darleen," I called Darleen when I caught her picking on Winona.

I go to lunch with Nicklaus and Juan. Sumasabay lang si Darleen kung saan kami tumatambay. But she doesn't really eat with us.

I watched how piss Winona was as I left with Darleen. Nilingon ko siya at hinintay na lumabas ng classroom bago ko pansinin ang sinasabi ni Darleen.

I tsk-ed. "Stop doing that to her."

Tumawa si Darleen. "What? She's a transferee, Kiro. Pabida siya masyado."

"Are you a kid?" I irritatingly asked her. "Grow up, Darleen. By the looks of it, you're bullying her."

"Huh? Hindi, ah!" she sounded defensive. "Why are you siding with her? I know that her father is competing with yours. Maybe that's why she's here, it's to get something from you."

Umigting ang panga ko. "She's not."

"How can you tell? That girl is not to be trusted, Akiro. Whatever she's up to, you cannot entertain it."

Nilingon ko si Darleen. "You tell me what to do, Darleen. You think I care for craps like that? She'd do whatever she wants from me. I don't give a damn."

"Hindi ka ba natatakot na matatalo ang Papa mo?"

I chuckled. Hindi ako nagsalita. I'm more scared and worried if he wins.

I know these days are different. People go straight to dating. But I wanted to court Winona. Gusto ko siya ligawan sa tamang paraan. It's what she deserves.

"Nasiraan daw si Riley sa Kennon. Susunduin daw ba natin o tatalon siya sa bangin?" humalakhak si Allen.

Jackie scoffed. "Hayaan mo na tumalon. Mabawasan man lang ang gunggong sa mundo."

"Allen, you didn't invite Winona? I told you to invite her," Dheia said.

Parang kinakalabit ako tuwing binabanggit nila ang pangalan niya kahit hindi naman ako iyon.

Allen smirked. "H'wag na. Balita ko magkaaway daw sila ni hapon sa research, eh."

I tss-ed. "Gabi na. Baka mapano pa sa daan..."

"Susunduin ko," si Allen sabay tingin sa akin.

Sinamaan ko ng tingin. "Subukan mo."

They threw me a birthday party at Allen's house. Iniisip ko paraan lamang nila iyon para uminom. I didn't want to celebrate my birthday. I don't like to celebrate an additional year that I have lived. If anyone should celebrate a birthday, it should be the one who actually gave birth. Not me.

I touched my lips and closed my head for a while. She kissed me in a holloween party days ago. Nangingiti ako habang hinahaplos ang labi ko. Kung hindi pa ako sikuhin ni Juan Miguel ay hindi ako gigising.

"Regalo ko," he said. He gave me a bottle of wine.

"Tss," umiiling na sabi ko. "You could've given me a car or something."

"Sensya na, Kiro," Riley sat infront of me after Jackie fetched him. "Nabigay ko sa ambagan pangregalo ko sayo."

"Fuck it, man" I just said.

Ngising aso ang binigay ni Allen sa akin. "May regalo ako sayo, pre!"

"Nasaan?"

"Teka lang kasi," sumulyap siya sa cellphone niya. "Tagal ng rider, eh. Kanina pa na-ship."

I sighed. Sinilip ko ang cellphone ko. I played around Winona's Instagram profile as people gathered around drinking.

Nasilip ni Allen ang cellphone. Umiiling siya habang pinagmamasdan ako. I closed my phone. Pinakita ko sa kaniya ang kamao ko.

"Obvious naman na ako ang gusto ni Winona, pre," he teased. "Pero sige, magpapaubaya na ako para sayo."

I scoffed. "Yeah, right."

"'Di nga, pre, seryoso. Utang na loob mo 'to sa akin, gago."

"Tangina mo."

"Lutong mo talaga magmura kahit hapon ka, ano?"

I had a couple of drinks. Binati ako ng iilang mga kaibigan ko na inimbitahan nila Riley. Darleen was also there. She greeted me along with our classmates whom she invited, too. All these people but I was looking for someone.

She walked into the party and my eyes were suddenly stuck on her. She doesn't notice the people turning their heads for her. She doesn't notice the eyes of men, trying to catch her attention. Hindi niya napapansin iyon. Pero ako, napapansin ko.

Because like them, I want her. Maybe a little different. I want her only for me.

Hindi ako kailanman naghangad ng sobra o nagdamot pero kapag sa kaniya, ayaw kong maagawan. Gusto ko akin lang ng buong buo.

Noong sinagot ako ni Winona, parang sinagot din ang isang libong dasal ko.

"Thank you for attending your father's party. It was really important to him, the election was near." My mother said days after the party. Noong sinagot ako ni Winona.

I nodded. "You should have called me earlier. What did the doctor say, Ma?"

"I'm fine," she said. "They just gave me the usual medications. Hindi ako aatakihin sa puso, don't worry." she even joked.

"Sinamahan ka ba ni Papa sa hospital?"

Mama smiled. "He's busy. Malapit na ang house-to-house campaign. I really want you to help your father, Aki."

I took a deep sigh. "You really think he's going to win?"

"Your father loves this city, Aki, you know that. He cares for Baguio. And people love him for that. Naniniwala ako doon."

"How can he rule a city when he can't even keep his family together?"

Mama looked at me and sighed. "Don't believe those articles. Hindi ko alam kung saan iyon naggaling. Obviously, they are just trying to bring us down. This is Lopez's work, for sure."

I tsk-ed. "They have nothing to do with this."

"Really, Aki? I know you've been closer to your daughter. I saw you at the party," she said. "Are you

giving out that information?"

Sometimes, I wonder if she stayed because she loved him
or because she didn’t know how to leave.

And it makes me question the one thing I’ve always feared.
What kind of love did I grow up learning?

"No," I said. "I didn't."

"Akiro, I know you're mad at your father. But this is too much. This is a humiliation to our family."

I clicked my jaw. "I didn't give her any information, Ma."

"Stay away from her," she said. "She's a threat to your father's success, Akiro."

Hindi ako sumagot. Hindi ako um-oo. Hindi ako humindi.

I heard about the articles. I heard it from my friends. At the back of my head, I know that I told Winona those things before it came out. I know that very well.

Maybe it was her. Maybe it all has her fingerprint. But maybe it's not her.

If it was her… I think I would’ve let her. I would’ve stood there and watched her tear down everything I was supposed to protect. Let her ruin me, ruin my father’s name, ruin whatever future was planned for me.

I stared at the photograph of our picture from the media. Naghahalikan kami. I sold one of my golf collector's pieces just for this.

Naabutan ko ang sarili kong nakangiti.

Tang ina. Sisirain niya ang buhay ko pero parang gusto ko pa.

I felt smitten enough to hand her the match and still thank her for the fire.

"Putang ina, Akiro," mura ni Nicklaus habang nakaupo ako sa malamig na upuan sa presinto.

My hands are handcuffed behind me. Police are in contact with my family. Nicklaus and Primo are in front of me. I don’t know why Allen called these two jerks.

Hindi pa naman nakakapasa sa board exam, abogado ko na kaagad.

"Those are not yours," Primo concluded after looking at the photo of the evidence.

Nakangisi kong sinandal ang ulo ko. Smart jerk. I closed my eyes.

"H'wag kang tumawa tawa d'yan, tang ina," si Nicklaus na hindi mapakali.

I looked at Nicklaus. "It's mine. I told you, akin."

The look on Winona's face flashed in my head. She was scared. She watched me being taken by the

authorities. I remember it clearly.

I wasn't angry. I didn't blame her. Even if I know for a fucking fact that this is her doing. I can't get mad. I cannot fucking get mad at her.

"Tell them the truth, Akiro," kalmadong sabi ni Primo. "Pwede pa i-trace ang fingerprints sa wallet na 'yon. Hindi sa iyo 'yon. I know you well. You're not doing this."

"I told them it's mine," sabi ko. "It's done."

"Who are you protecting?" Nicklaus asked.

Hindi ako nagsalita.

Wala sa sariling tumawa si Nicklaus. Sinapo ni Primo ang noo niya na para bang naintindihan niya ang nangyayari. I licked my lips.

"You gotta be kidding me..." Nicklaus cursed under his breath. "This is her doing."

"No," I denied.

"Tang ina, hapon. You're going to jail because of that girl?"

Matalim kong tinignan si Klaus. "Don't talk to her like that."

"We’re trying to save your ass and you’re defending the one person who literally put you in this mess?" Klaus sounded pissed.

I gritted my teeth. "That's on me, Nicklaus. Not on her."

"Wake the fuck up, man. She's been using you all this time. You're not going to throw your life away because of this. We're getting you out of this jail."

I looked at Klaus. "You're not going to do that."

Primo confusingly looked at me. "What do you want us to do?"

"I'm going to jail if I have to. She's not going to be blamed for this." tumayo ako.

"Fucking..." hinilamos ni Nicklaus ang kamay sa mukha. "Unbelievable."

I sat in a cold empty cell.

It was she who put me here. I had every right to get mad. I should've.

But all I could think about was her. Whether she was scared. Whether she thought she had gone too far. Whether she would come back to me after everything.

I worried about how she must feel, carrying all of this alone, believing she had to do it herself. I worried she might regret it. I worried she might hide from me, afraid I’d be disappointed, or angry, or worse… that I’d stop caring.

The cell grew colder when a police officer told me that my mother had been rushed to the hospital. While I was behind bars, sitting in a cold concrete room that smelled like rust and cheap disinfectant, she was fighting for her life in a hospital bed.

She had a heart attack on the same night they arrested me. She kept saying I was innocent even when she could barely breathe.

But all I could do was sit there with my hands cuffed and my knees shaking.

"Your father posted the bail," the police officer said as he opened the door.

"Where is he?" walang emosyon na sabi ko.

Nilingon niya si Papa na nasa station. He's sitting on a bench. He was staring at the wall. There was a look in his eyes I didn't like. Something told me that something is not right.

Father looked at me with weakness in his eyes. "She's gone."

Hindi ako gumalaw.

"Your mother's gone."

For a second I honestly thought I misheard him. My brain refused to process it. Para akong nabingi. Something sharp hit my ear.

He looked at me with fury in his eyes now. "It's all because of the mess you made. Are you happy now?"

Umigting ang panga ko. My knuckles curled. I immediately let it go when I realized that maybe my father's right this time. Maybe it's all my fault. Maybe it's just right.

My father stood up. "We're going back to Japan with your mother's ashes."

I shook my head. "What makes you think I'm coming with you?"

He grabbed my neckline. I stared at him. He's blaming me, that's all I can read in his eyes. He's blaming me for my mother's death. I can take it. I blame myself too. But I saw that he was grieving. That's what made me feel angry. He doesn't have the right to grieve.

"Is this because of that Lopez?" he whispered. "Your mother died because of that stupid bitch and now you're turning your back against your family for her."

I removed his hand from me. My hand shook. I wanted to get mad but I was weak. Mabigat ang dibdib ko. Ayaw kong gumawa ng bagay na hindi ako sigurado.

Papa shook his head, disappointingly. "I will put that bitch in jail. She's the reason why—"

"She's not," tanggi ko.

"I might be a shitty father but your mother raised you better. You are not doing drugs," he said. "You're not a criminal. I will put those Lopezes behind these bars. They will not be getting away from this."

I swallowed hard. "You will not be doing that."

"You know damn well I can do that. And I will." he looked at me curiously. "Do not tell me you fell for that bitch of a Lopez, Akiro?"

"Do not call her that!" tumaad ang boses ko. "You want us to go back to Japan? Done. Just.. do not touch her. This is not her fault."

My own father couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it either.

Walang namuong galit sa dibdib ko sa nangyari. She planted those drugs but it wasn't my main concern. I didn't care even if I was locked in jail while my mother was in her deathbed. I didn't care for that.

All I thought about was whether everything was a lie. Was it all a lie? Nasaan ang hindi? May hindi ba? Kahit iyong mga halik na lang ang totoo.

"I'm sure you like her," a friend said to me. "She's a Filipino. I heard you like Filipinas."

Tumaas ang kilay ko. I stared at the girl infront of me. Tan skined, straight black hair, and pretty. Sumimsim ako sa alak na hawak ko at hindi nagsalita.

Later on, I just found myself kissing the girl's lips. I don’t even remember her name. The alcohol had already hit me in my brain before I could even try remembering her name. She moaned as she started kissing my neck like she was the one in the pleasure.

"Hmm, Akiro..." she moaned. "Can I call you Aki? Or you prefer Kiro?"

I pushed her lightly. "Stop."

Her lips parted and she looked at me confused. "Why?"

"I'm not in the mood already."

Nairita siya doon. "Do you want a pill? We can take one."

I tss-ed. "Go away..." I started looking for my cigarette in my pocket.

Sisindihan ko pa lang iyon pero narinig ko kaagad ang boses ni Winona. She hates me smoking. I pulled the cigarette out of my mouth and threw it somewhere. Malutong akong nagmura.

"What's wrong? Koshi said you're single," the girl said. "Is it? You want something else? I can do blow jobs to turn you on—"

"No," iritado kong sabi. "You're no good to me today. Find someone else and tell Koshi to leave me the fuck alone. Do you understand?"

Tumalikod ako, medyo iritado.

"Tang ina, ang yabang. Gwapo pa naman. Hindi ba ako masarap, huh!" I heard her ask herself before I left.

I tried kissing women. After work, I drowned myself with alcohol and Koshi would throw women at me. Kumakagat ako. I let them sit in my lap, I kiss them but that's just it.

I push them away. I cannot see myself with another woman. I tried drinking it off, you know, baka sakali maalis. Pero putang ina, mas lumilinaw pa ang mukha ni Winona sa utak ko tuwing lasing.

Asleep or awake, I see her face. It was a dream and a nightmare at the same fucking time.

I thought of her often. Maybe she's working now. Maybe she's living comfortably. Maybe she got a boyfriend who gives her anything she would've wanted. Something I couldn't give her back then.

I refused to believe that. But no matter how many times that thought hit me, I refused to believe it. I refused to picture her with someone else.

I watched Winona closely. I learned everything she does. I know when she's starting to lose her temper, I know when she's starting to get bored, I know when she's happy. I know it well.

Winona is high maintenance in her own way. Not because of money, but because she knows her worth. She's very conservative, according to her. She's feisty. She gets into trouble because of how strong her personality is.

She deserves a man who can handle that. She deserves someone who can tolerate and guide her because her decisions can be questionable sometimes. She deserves someone who watches her closely because she doesn't often share her problems.

She deserves a man who doesn't treat her personality as threat, but as someone worth protecting. She needs someone who chooses her everyday. Sa mga araw na galit siya, sa mga araw na magulo ang isip niya, sa mga araw na mahirap maintindihan.

And God, if I ever get another chance. I'd spent the rest of my life becoming exactly that man for her.

"Are you sure about the Manila headquarters?" one of the board of directors asked me. "It's a big move, Mr. Ayasaki."

I gained a license in Psychology. But I chose to be more practical. I used my father's growing business in Tokyo to start a sister company, my very own. I've been in this industry for four years. Rough start but I managed to push.

I nodded. "Our clients are mostly Manila-based. Most of our new hires are from NCR. And the expansion programs for tech startups are concentrated in Makati. It just makes sense."

Umiwas ako ng tingin. I'm not good in lying. Sino ba ang niloloko ko?

Another director leaned forward. "What about the cost? Makati properties aren’t cheap."

"I know," I said calmly, "but it’s an investment. We need easier access to investors and partner companies. And Makati already has the infrastructure we need. High-speed data, corporate zoning, international offices nearby. It will save us years."

The room went quiet for a moment.

Someone asked, "So you’re transferring there personally?"

"Yes," I answered. "If we’re opening a headquarters there, I want to oversee it myself."

They nodded, finally understanding the strategy.

The meeting adjournment. Nakasandal ako sa upuan habang pinapanood silang umalis sa conference room. My eyes are stuck on my laptop. I scrolled down to see messages from my contacts.

I didn’t plan on digging into her father. Honestly, I avoided it for years. But after years of trying to move on, when I realized that I couldn't, I tried searching for answers.

I dug a lot. Drugs, money, ghost projects, everything worth suing.

My father moved on from this. He never wanted to go back to this country again. He spent the years after my mother died, regretting his life decisions. I did, too. But unlike him, I wanted my answers.

Nangati ang kamao ko. Hindi ko alam. Nabuhay ang galit sa dibdib ko.

Nicklaus muttered a curse while flipping one folder open. “Do you even understand how big this is?"

Humalukipkip ako habang nakatingin sa malaking salamin sa Makati. I tried remembering Winona's face after seeing her in an auction. Hindi ako nakatulog.

"That's why I needed your help, didn't I?" sarkastiko kong sabi.

Klaus clicked his tongue. "These aren’t small-time syndicates, Kiro. These are government officials. Generals. This is a nest of snakes. How the hell did you even find these?"

Ngumisi ako. "Tell me what to do."

"Tell you what?" kumunot ang noo niya. "Are you trying to burn your business down? Why the hell are you doing this? Kasi kung mali ang dahilan mo, I’m walking out that door."

"You're here as a lawyer, Nicklaus. Answer my damn question."

"Lo-fucking-Pez." Nicklaus looked at the file in his hand and laughed. "I knew it. Goddammit, Akiro… you came all the way back to Manila for her."

Hindi ako nagsalita. I grabbed the glass of whiskey from the table.

"I came here for justice."

"By taking her father down? You're going to win her back by that?"

Umigting ang panga ko. "I'm not here to win anyone back. Are you going to help me or am I just doing this by myself?"

Nicklaus chuckled. "H'wag mo akong lokohin. You could've built your goddamn headquarters in Baguio. Dito pa talaga? Bakit? Sisilay ka?"

"Putang ina mo."

"You can take revenge on someone you're still in love with."

I scoffed. "I didn't call you here to talk about love, Attorney Peters. Can we move to the fucking

discussion? This is nonsense."

"Fine," he muttered. "If you’re going to jump into hell… then at least let me make sure you don’t walk in there blind."

I hate lying.

I wasn't really good at it. Sinubukan ko. I tried to fight my feelings when I saw Winona. I wanted her to feel my anger. I wanted her to feel how hurt I was.

Pero imbis na ganoon, siya ang naramdaman ko. I forgot my anger. I forgot the pain she caused. Sa isang iglap, pinatawad ko. Sa isang iglap, nakalimutan ko na dapat pala akong magalit.

I just wanted her again.

I don't care if she lies again. She can lie to me every day and I would still believe every single thing she says.

The day she went to Baguio without me knowing, scared me. I know her very well.

I knew her. I knew exactly how she would react. Once I told her about her father, she wouldn’t stay silent. She never did. Winona had morals. Unyielding, stubborn, relentless morals.

She would demand answers. She would seek justice. She would act, even if it put her in danger. She's always fighting for what she believes in, no matter the cost. And somehow, knowing that only made my chest tighten.

Malamig ang kamay ko habang nasa sasakyan at pinapanood ang mga pulis na pumasok sa bahay nila Winona. Nicklaus was signaling men while I was in the car, waiting for my signal.

"They're not going to hurt her, right?" I asked Nicklaus.

Nicklaus stared at me. Hindi siya nagsalita.

She knows everything and that's why they locked her up. Nicklaus already warned me about those people. They're the type of monster who bury people like animals. Lalong nanlamig ang kamay ko.

"They're all armed," Klaus said while talking to some kind of earwires. "We can't go in."

Fucking...

Lumabas ako sa sasakyan. Nagmura si Nicklaus at lumabas din doon para sundan ako.

"Akiro, fuck it!" mura ni Klaus.

"You can't expect me to stay there, Nicklaus."

"I know!" iritadong sabi niya at sumunod sa akin.

I heard gunshots. Hindi ako tumigil. Mas lalo ko pang binilisan tumakbo. I got in the main door when I saw Klaus hiding in a bush. Sumesenyas siya sa akin na bumalik.

I didn't. I didn't even dare to look back at him.

I entered the main door. I already saw blood on the tiles. Nagputukan ulit.

Nabingi ako nang natamaan ang likod ko. I cursed loudly. I ran to the second floor of the house and didn't mind the shot in my back. Sinipa ko ang isang pintuan doon. It was an office.

I saw people there.

My shoulder felt numb. Blood started running down my arms. I watched the four familiar government officials point guns at me.

There were three of them. The other one was Winona's father. Felix Lopez. Hiding like scum in the office.

Before they could click their guns, policemen started entering the office and pointed guns at them. Ang isa ay nanlaban pa pero kaagad inagaw ang baril.

"You got hit, Sir Ayasaki. Bumalik na tayo doon sa labas—"

"No," I stepped and stood in front of Felix Lopez'. Nanginginig ang kamay ko.

I wanted to punch him. I wanted to scream. But I couldn't. Felix Lopez looked at me. I saw that he was nervous, more like scared.

"Sir Ayasaki, you're not allowed to interrogate these people!"

"She's in her room," Felix Lopez said. "Find her."

Kumuyom lalo ang kamao ko.

Tumalikod ako. A policeman stepped in front of me, trying to stop me. "You have to cooperate with us. It's too risky. Go back to the car. We will find Miss Lopez—"

"Move."

"Sir—"

"I will find her myself."

I pushed him before he could talk. I didn't listen. I didn't care if my shoulder was numb. I felt every blood in my hands but all I thought about was Winona.

The moment she got shot in my arm. I pressed my hand on the wound, but the blood seeped through my fingers like it was choosing to leave her.

I pulled her into my chest tighter, like I could fuse her to me and keep her alive with just my heartbeat. Her head rested on my shoulder, too heavy. Too still.

Her lips were pale. She was weak and pale. Hindi ko alam kung ano pa ang ginawa sa kaniya. Nakakagalit.

"Don't you dare," my voice shook. "Don't you dare do this to me..." I whispered to Winona.

I stood up carrying her in my arms. Hindi ko alam kung saan pa ako kumukuha ng lakas. My right shoulder was painful and my vision was already blurring.

"Fucking..." Nicklaus ran to me holding a gun. "How are you still alive? No shit?"

"Hospital, now!"

The moment they pulled the bullet out of me, I immediately went to Winona. She was still unconscious. She was still pale and weak. It broke my heart. I put her here. I knew she would do that and I didn't dare stop her.

I was leading the investigation into her father. Wala akong pinalampas. Everything was on the table, enough for them to pay and to party in jail. Kulang pa iyon.

"After everything, you still care for her." I heard her father say after helping us by confessing to his crimes. "Why?"

I stopped for a while. It was a question I could only answer with my feelings. It can only be answered by how I felt.

"I'll take care of her."

"You're a good man, Ayasaki," he said and he had a small smile on his lips. "My daughter is the only good thing I've ever done in my life. Don't... break her heart just like I did."

Tumayo ako. "I don't really plan to."

I would never forgive him. I could never. But every time I see Winona, I feel thankful for him. He was right. She was the only good thing he ever did. And for that, I forgave him.

Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. I held to that my whole life. Because life forced him to find that space.

I realized it the night he punched my father. I realized it again in the jail cell after losing my mother. I realized it every time I stood on the edge of becoming the kind of man I swore I'd never be.

And then I realized it most when it came to her. That space widened whenever it came to her.

I could choose.

I could choose anger, but I chose understanding. I could choose pride, but I chose to stay. I could choose to walk away, but I chose to love her. Painfully, completely.

I watched Winona march toward me with that familiar storm-in-her-eyes look. Behind me, a tiny head peeked outtrying and failing to hide his giggles.

"Come here," I whispered to my son. "What did you do, hmm..."

Winona held up her purse. Her white purse. Except now it was… not white. It was a constellation, stars, lines, scribbleslike a toddler's version of modern art. She stared at me as if I did it.

"I told you to stop buying him markers anymore. Tignan mo ang ginawa ng anak mo..."

I chuckled. Anak niya kapag mabait, anak ko kapag pasaway.

I placed Kio in my lap. "Say sorry to Mommy."

My two-year-old son sighed and looked at her mother. "I'm sorry, Mommy."

Winona raised a brow, but her expression softened. She knelt, kissed our son’s cheek, and despite everything she returned the marker he was holding.

"Do you promise not to write on my bags?"

"Yes!" Our little traitor clapped, then ran to his room, probably to vandalize something else.

Nilingon ko ang asawa ko. She looked at me like I was still at fault.

"Fine. I'll buy you another one of those," I said.

She smiled n

[Content truncated due to length]

Author's Note

Thank you for making it this far! This is my ninth novel completed. I'm open to criticism. This will be soon edited. Thank you! Check out some stories on my page. You guys are the best. Salamat po.

So far, what is your favorite novel under this series and your favorite line? Let's get to know each other!

REMINDER :

This series/novel doesn't promote the use of alcohol/drugs/ cigarettes. DO NOT romanticize men/women in use. This is only a work of fiction. Thank you.

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